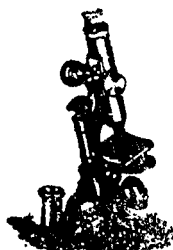


## Medical Matters.

### THE GROWTH OF TRUTH.



Dr. William Osler, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, who delivered the Harveian Oration at the Royal College of Physicians last week took as his subject "The Growth of Truth" as illustrated by the history of Harvey's great discovery of the circulation of the blood.

He pointed out that truth grows like a living organism, and that its gradual evolution can be traced from the germ to the mature product. Never springing, Minerva-like, to full stature at once, truth suffers all the hazards incident to generation and gestation, and much history is a record of the mishaps of truths which have struggled to the birth, only to die or to wither in premature decay. Secondly, all scientific truth is conditioned by the state of knowledge at the time of its announcement. Thus, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the science of optics and its mechanical appliances had not made possible (so far as the human mind was concerned) the existence of blood capillaries and of blood corpuscles. Jenner could not have added to his inquiry a discourse on immunity. Sir William Perkin and the chemists made Koch possible, Pasteur gave the conditions which produced Lister, Davy and others furnished the preliminaries necessary for anæsthesia. Everywhere we find the invariable filiation, one event following the other in orderly sequence, "mind begets mind," as Harvey said, "opinion is the source of opinion." And thirdly, to scientific truth alone can the *homo mensura* principle be applied, since of all the mental treasures of the race it alone compels general acquiescence. That that general acquiescence, that aspect of certainty, is not reached *per saltum*, but is of slow, often of difficult growth, marked by failures and frailties, but crowned at last with an acceptance accorded to no other product of mental activity, is illustrated by every important discovery from Copernicus to Darwin. The growth of truth corresponds to the states of knowledge described by Plato in the "Theætetus"—acquisition, latent possession, conscious possession. Scarcely a discovery can be named which does not present these phases in its evolution. In a hundred important problems acquisition has by slow stages become latent possession; and then only the final touch, the crystal in the saturated solution,

is needed to give us conscious possession of the truth. When those stages are ended, there remains the final struggle for general acceptance. Locke's remark that "Truth scarce ever yet carried it by vote anywhere at its first appearance" is borne out by the history of all discoveries of the first rank.

The iron yoke of conformity is upon all necks, and in our minds, as in our bodies, the force of habit becomes irresistible. From our teachers and associates, from our reading, from the social atmosphere about us, we catch the beliefs of the day, and they become part of our nature. For most of us that happens in the haphazard process we call *éducation*; and it goes on just as long as we retain mental receptivity. It was never better expressed than in the famous lines which occurred to Henry Sidgwick in his sleep:—

We think so because all other people think so ;  
 Or because—or because—after all, we do think so ;  
 Or because we were told so, and think we must think so ;  
 Or because we once thought so, and think we still think so ;  
 Or because having thought so, we think we will think so.

In departing from any settled opinion or belief, the variation, the change, the break with custom may come gradually, but the final break is made by some one individual, who sees with his own eyes, and, by an instinct or genius for truth, escapes from the routine in which his fellows live. He often pays dearly for his boldness; and the man who expresses a new idea is very apt to be abused and ill-treated, while there is something much worse which has been illustrated again and again in history. However eminent a man may become in science, he is very apt to carry with him errors which were in vogue when he was young, errors that darken his understanding, and make him incapable of accepting even the most obvious truths. It is, said the lecturer, a great consolation to know that even Harvey came within the range of this law; it is the most human touch in his career.

In conclusion, Professor Osler exhorted the Fellows and members to study the secrets of nature by way of experiment, and also, for the honour of the profession to continue in love and affection among themselves. The memory of Harvey was honoured for the admirable virtues of his character not less than for the scientific methods which he taught.

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