

**Some debatable questions and how to solve them : an address delivered at the opening of the session, 1883-4, before the Birmingham and Edgbaston Debating Society / by Sampson Gamgee.**

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*Edward Thomas by  
Wm. T. ...*

# SOME DEBATABLE QUESTIONS

AND

HOW TO SOLVE THEM. 2

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# AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

OPENING OF THE SESSION, 1883-4,

BEFORE THE

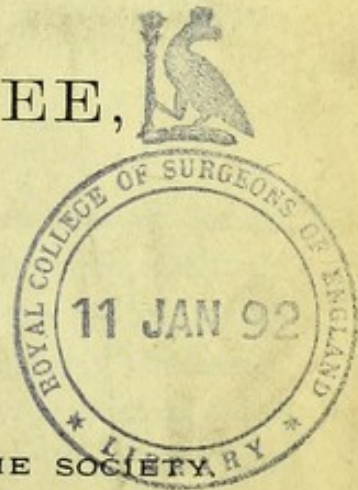
BIRMINGHAM AND EDGBASTON DEBATING SOCIETY,

BY

SAMPSON GAMGEE,

F.R.S.E.

PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.



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SOME DEBATABLE QUESTIONS

HOW TO SOLVE THEM

AN ADDRESS

SAMUEL JOHNSON

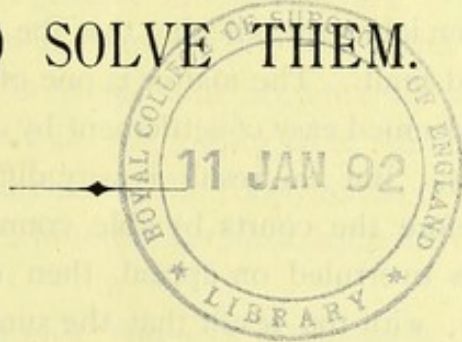
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# SOME DEBATABLE QUESTIONS, AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM.



LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Your Committee having approved a suggestion, to open this Session of the old Birmingham and Edgbaston Debating Society with an Address from the Chair, I ask your attention to some observations, which I trust may not be deemed unworthy your notice, on "*Some Debatable Questions, and how to solve them.*"

It cannot too often be repeated that every question, whether of opinion and taste, or of fact and inference, is open to debate. Pope tells us, that

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches—none  
Go just alike, yet each believes his own."

There seems good reason to believe that no amount of discussion can bring about a consensus of opinion on such questions as: Who is the greatest epic poet? What are the relative merits of Hallam and Lingard, as historians?—of Dickens and Thackeray, as novelists?—of Donizzetti and Mozart, as writers of operatic music? Here is scope for the widest difference of opinion and taste, and anyone who debates such questions has themes of ever-charming freshness, for his own and others' intellectual delectation and sustenance. There is no fixed standard by which such matters can be judged.

But even in subjects in which it might be deemed possible to establish a rule of judgment on matters of fact, agreement is often

so difficult that the question cannot be removed from the region of debate to that of certainty.

Take this occurrence in a bank. A customer has an overdrawn account, and is in the habit of paying in cash and bills of exchange. One of his cheques is returned, and he seeks redress for injury to his commercial credit, alleging that the returned cheque was within his allowed limit. The matter is one of account, and at first sight would be deemed easy of settlement by an unprejudiced and skilled third party. But the result is very different. The contention is argued before the courts by able counsel. The decision in first instance is overruled on appeal, then upset again, and so on to the Lords; with the result that the sum total of the judges' dicta may numerically be very nearly balanced. Questions of patent-right, which are chiefly of fact, are rich in similar instances of dissidence; and the more you investigate, the stronger evidence do you obtain that every question is debatable, requiring to be approached with caution, and discussed with comprehensiveness and impartiality.

Of no questions is that more true than of historical ones. Take for instance that of the discovery of the circulation of the blood, ever rich in interest, and just now vividly recalled by the re-interment of Harvey's remains. Did he make the discovery? So great a man as William Hunter, writing in the last century, replied in the negative; so do this day the members of the Academy of Rome, who attribute the discovery to Cæsalpinus. That Harvey discovered all the truths involved in a knowledge of the circulation of the blood, cannot be maintained for a moment. That was the work of many men in different ages; and, when this question is debated, the relative merits of successive workers claim recognition. Galen contributed facts of the first importance. The famous passage in the *Christianismi Restitutio* of Michael Servetus, bears the impress of inspired genius, and scarcely less wonderful is that from Carlo Ruini. Harvey's predecessor, Realdus Columbus, knew and demonstrated the lesser or pulmonary circulation—namely, the transit of blood from the heart to the lungs and back to the heart.

Cæsalpinus was the first who used the word circulation, and he knew as an experimental truth that, when compressed, arteries fill above, and veins below, the point of pressure. Lastly, Harvey's own master at Padua admirably described the valves of the veins, which, looked at with our present knowledge, are evidently so constructed as only to allow the current one way. But their use was not known to their discoverer and accurate delineator; it was left for Harvey to collect all the known facts, eliminate fallacies, and add original researches in the construction of the chain of evidence, which proved to absolute demonstration the circulation of the blood.

To those who deny not only Harvey's merits as a discoverer, but the fact that his researches were largely based on experiments on living animals, it might be sufficient to oppose the first paragraph from Harvey's first chapter, "When I first gave my mind to vivisection. as a means of discovering the motions and uses of the heart." The opponents of experiments on living animals actually deny that they were the chief, the most fertile, and the most reliable source of John Hunter's original work. When I remind you, that the society which advocates these views includes amongst its members the Lord Chief Justice of England, who is in opposition on this point to the vast majority of scientific men throughout the world, you have before you very cogent proof of my first proposition, that every question is open to debate. Furthermore, when you reflect that one so accustomed to weigh evidence as Lord Coleridge is, though in a very small minority, in uncompromising opposition, you see the necessity of being tolerant, when ordinary men do not agree with the opinions of the majority, though based on evidence *prima facie* irrefutable.

Just a few more words on the vivisection question, which has been and still continues to be a fertile subject of debate. It has been chiefly considered in its relations to physiological science; but it occurred to me, a few years since, to devote an article to setting forth the beneficial influence, which had been exerted, by experiment on living animals, on the progress of Human Surgery.

This endeavour received so much encouragement that the research was pursued ; and its results were embodied in an address delivered at the commencement of last year in the Birmingham Medical Institute. Having undertaken to prove that, "Without experiments on living animals, scientific surgery could not have been founded, and its present humane and safe practice would be impossible," I adduced evidence from original sources, collated with the strictest accuracy.

In England, on the continent of Europe, and in America, scientific men and professional critics ratified the conclusions, and approved the method, of the address ; but one gentleman joined issue, and in a pamphlet on the uselessness of vivisection paid me the marked compliment of devoting some ten or more pages to my special refutation. An antivivisection society was so delighted with that production, as to spread it broadcast by thousands ; and one very humane lady screeched at me, gloried at my discomfiture, and said some naughty things, which I enjoyed at the time, but should very soon have forgotten, had she not recalled them by an unsought public retractation, quite charming for its candour.

I took no notice of the lady or her protégé. However interesting and justifiable an initial cause of debate, it is very apt to degenerate into an unseemly wrangle, the moment personalities are introduced. They are fatal to the impartiality indispensable in quest of truth, which should be the first and constant aim of every debater.

It is no use discussing with one who denies that John Hunter was nothing, if not an enquirer into the mysteries of nature on the basis of experiment, on living animals included. In the particular instance referred to, my two chief opponents may, I fear, almost have thought me discourteous in taking no notice of them ; but, standing as they did in such illustrious company as that of Lord Coleridge, they could very well afford to dispense with any attention from so humble a person as myself. Time, that indispensable factor in the solution of all debatable questions, must and will, decide which of us was right. In working out difficult

problems, scientific or social, of abstract or applied mathematics, of moral or of physical science, time and patience are no less essential than zeal.

Contemplating with admiration, as everyone must, the vigorous activity of modern life, the fear now and then suggests itself that a little more patience, a more graduated pressure, a more evenly regulated speed, would be conducive to progress with less risk and friction, more happiness and comfort to the individual, more safety and honour to the State, especially so in that vast debatable question—*Education*.

It is impossible to contemplate without anxiety the forcing system in vogue, for bringing children of tender age up to a certain fixed standard of instruction. The attempt to cram all their minds with the same kind and amount of information in a given period, would almost seem to be based on the assumption that the process was a mechanical one, of filling heads, like measures of a given cubical capacity, in a given time—

"So by false learning is good sense defaced :  
Some are bewildered in the maze of schools,  
And some made coxcombs nature meant but fools."

To feed the mind as the body, food should be suited to the individual, and supplied in such quantities as to be capable of digestion and assimilation. In the process of bodily or mental nutrition, it is not only the filling of an empty stomach, or an empty head, that is to be aimed at; but the development and training of the powers of thought and movement, so as to increase their initial force, and methodise and utilise their application, without jerk, rupture, or exhaustion.

Man is an animal of slow growth. The ends of his thigh bones at eighteen years of age are separable from the shaft, as are those of a spring chicken at three months. The human spine in all its parts is not consolidated and complete, until a man is five-and-twenty years of age. The process of physical evolution and consolidation is gradual and continuous; and to pretend prematurely to force mental growth and culture, is to go in face of the laws of nature. On this question the consensus of medical



authorities throughout the world is becoming daily more and more pronounced ; and it is to be hoped that, before long, the laws of physiology and the dictates of common sense may, in the educational question, overrule some of the influence now so injuriously exercised by party politics and scholastic crotchets.

In treating every debatable question, it is of the first importance to narrow the issue to essentials, and to eliminate accessories,—all the more if there be any risk of their raising personal issues. Politics are admittedly contentious. Education demands calm and impartial study. In politics the struggle for personal power is incessant ; in the library and in the schoolroom, the one condition precedent to success is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. It is inconceivable that the question of a man's fitness to sit at an educational board should be determined by the school of politics to which he belongs, or by his religious faith. Those who advocate the exclusion of religion from a system of national education, may defend it on the principle just previously laid down—the reduction of matters in controversy within the narrowest possible limits. But sectarian religion is a very different thing from a knowledge and teaching of those fundamental principles of man's responsibility and God's government, which are at the very foundation of individual happiness and national greatness. Granted that so-called materialists and unbelievers may achieve noble ends ; it yet remains true that the vast majority of the best and kindest, the ablest and the most useful men and women, in all ages and in all countries, have practically recognised the power of religion in the elimination of vice, and in the cultivation of those higher moral qualities which purify, fortify, and ennoble.

It is often said that the application of the ratepayers' money to religious instruction would by many be deemed an injustice ; but they do not seem to consider what a hardship a very large number feel it, when constituted authorities deny all religious instruction to their children.

So far as I am aware, the history of the introduction of the Bible into the local Board Schools has never been publicly and

wholly told ; but there is very good reason to believe, that in an upheaval in the very midst of the great political assembly which largely influences local affairs, common sense and right feeling forced the no-Bible party to, at least, a partial capitulation.

A state of things which merely admits of the Bible being read, without word or comment, cannot be deemed satisfactory or final. It matters little whether the religious principles inculcated be formulated by the disciples of Augustine, or of Moses Maimonides. Only let us get rid of the idea that men and women can be reared to sustain the brain and heart trials of this world, and to prepare for the next, by physiology, geology, and as many more ologies as can be crammed into them.

Nowhere, perhaps, more than in our midst, are the difficulties felt of complicating the educational question with party politics. The fact is too well known to need more than a mere statement, that the great majority of the Birmingham Town Council belongs to one political party ; but, for the purposes of our argument, it matters not what that party is. If the positions were reversed, the principle in debate would remain unaltered. That a Municipality should include within its ranks the most honorable and competent citizens, chosen by the suffrages of their fellows, is a proposition from which, theoretically, few would be found to dissent. That conceded, it follows that the more important and honourable the work entrusted to the Municipality the greater the sense of the responsibility in its individual members, the keener and the more elevating will be the aspiration of other citizens, to win by merit succession to their places as vacancies occur.

But if succession is to be decided on the strictest lines of political partisanship, it is clear that the field of selection must be proportionately limited. No injustice and no disrespect is involved in the statement that, in a community which, for rapidity of growth, has few rivals in the world, there has neither been time nor opportunity to train a large number of men competent to direct educational institutions. To the honour of those who have not had the personal advantages of high culture, it must be ungrudgingly

admitted, that, from their ranks, have sprung some of the most generous patrons of education. But it remains true that, in every community, the persons most distinguished for intellectual power and acquirement are in the minority. Nay, more, it is true that the habit of mind and pursuits of such persons tend to create in them a distaste for political controversy. To such persons, the advance to power in the direction of affairs is practically closed, in any community dominated by an exclusive political organisation. Some may argue, that it is best for a Town Council and appropriate committees to govern educational institutions, and leave professors to the work of teaching. But on this matter no one can doubt, that we are a very young and comparatively inexperienced community, who may well look around for precept and example.

Admitting that the conditions of Oxford and Cambridge are too dissimilar from ours, let us glance at the University of Edinburgh, which has grown step by step with its municipality. There, the Senate or Professorial body is in the van. The Town Council certainly always exercised great influence, but its members had the advantage of the old Scottish education. In spite of that, the Act of 1858, from which dates the wonderful development of the University of Edinburgh, distinctly aimed at the limitation of the power of the Municipal Representatives. In the Owens' College, Manchester, and in the Victoria University, largely resting on its foundation, the Professors and Senate are constituted advisers, and on their reputation rests and grows that of the College and University.

In the anticipated measure of municipal reform for the metropolis, no one seriously anticipates that clauses will be introduced for securing to the new municipality a controlling influence in the University of London. It is a most legitimate object of local ambition that our higher educational institutions should develop and coalesce, for the ultimate advantages of university organisation and life. For the consummation of such an end, scientific and scholarly men must be to the fore; and if the Town Council is to take any considerable part, it should be recruited so far as possible

from the most competent men. But such men are only likely to come forward in decreasing numbers, unless they are protected from the abuse of village politicians and of the hirelings of irresponsible party organisations. The state of things in our midst would suffer less from strict political demarcation, if the Town Council representatives on our educational institutions submitted reports which became the subject of public discussions. But this is practically impossible with the system which has grown up. So long as it is understood that committees are to work out, within closed doors, business referred to them, and that reports are to be passed with substantial unanimity, discussion will become more and more difficult, and any one professing independence will be liable to a charge of obstruction. If such a state of things be justifiable, it becomes a debatable question whether a system of paternal government be not superior to a constitutional one; and whether the Parliament sitting at Berlin be not superior to the one assembled at Westminster.

It must be within the recollection of many whom I have the privilege of addressing, that under the last Napoleonic rule, anyone who dared question the wisdom of the dominant majority was tabooed as an obstructive. The solid unity of the majority was an endless theme of praise, and the monuments of beautified Paris were pointed at as a substantial evidence of material progress. The Empire fell nevertheless. The causes of its decadence were many; but amongst the most prominent were—the violence done to intellectual and conscientious minorities,—the disregard of the truism that “he who pulls too much breaks the rope,”—and the violation of the spirit of compromise, which has pervaded our own history and is so pre-eminently characteristic of the best English life.

Discussion is an educating power, alike for those who debate and for those who listen; for those who govern no less than for the governed.

By common admission de-centralization of government is desirable, to relieve the congestion at Westminster, and to admit of

the more rapid transaction of business, by sub-division in separate centres, where special facts can be investigated and dealt with by competent men. But what chance is there of such a consummation, with the consensus of Parliament, if, in local assemblies, minorities are to be silenced, or assailed with a seemingly inexhaustible vocabulary of insult?

It is a question worth debating how it has come to pass that in a community, which won its way to the Municipal and Parliamentary franchise by fighting against majorities, scarcely a generation elapsed before the energy of its leaders was bent on silencing the minority within their boundaries? By what psychological process does it come to pass, that one of the most eloquent and conscientious advocates of religious Nonconformity is ever in the van enforcing the tenets and practice of the most absolute political conformity? How is it that so many of our most uncompromising advocates of free trade are opposed to freedom of thought and of discussion, in matters of the highest possible local interest?

What would be the fate of our manufacturers and merchants in the competing markets of the world, if a standard of uniformity could be enforced for the design and quality of their goods? If honourable rivalry be essential to material production, it is no less so in mental work, in thought and in speech. Mediocrities take care of themselves; they are proverbially prolific and tenacious; the instinct of self-preservation is strong in all weak creatures. But, for the production of specimens of superior excellence, nurseries and training grounds are required. Encouragement and free scope for development must be given, quite as much in the case of men and women as in that of cabbages and cattle.

To measure the progress of a community by its mere accumulated wealth, is a fallacious standard. During this century, the rich men of the world have been growing richer, at a rate previously unknown. The difficulty of finding safe employment for large capital is steadily on the increase; and it is generally conceded that that nation will go, and keep, to the fore, which can

import into the contest the most enlightened and cultivated enterprise. It will be easier to reproduce Rothschilds and Vanderbilts than Newtons and Faradays. Truly the instinct and method of the commercial man must exercise its due regulating power; but, unless all the resources of literature, science, and art be utilised, technical education advanced, and the standard of individual and national morality raised and purified, degeneracy will be inevitable.

Let anyone look across the Atlantic, and compare New York and Boston. The former has rendered possible the autobiography of a Thurloe Weed, the Napoleon of wire-pullers; but the home of Harvard University is the cradle of American literature, science, and statesmanship. In the Franco-German contest the issue was not merely decided by arms. The centre of brain power had been removed from Paris to Berlin; and the most ominous sign of French decadence to-day is failure in the race for intellectual supremacy.

But perhaps enough suggestions have been thrown out in this fragmentary address to furnish material for more than one evening's discussion. To visitors, as well as members, the right of comment is unrestricted, and, although it is a good rule to speak to resolutions, wide latitude will be allowed on this our first meeting for the session. The object of the society is debate for mutual instruction, to elicit the truth, to illustrate its many-sidedness, and to give expression to opinions in clear and well-considered terms. If I might venture to offer a few suggestions to young debaters, I would say—With truth for your fixed aim, strive incessantly after a knowledge of facts, and train the mental powers in observing and reasoning. Our senses are but instruments, the brain an organ, requiring exercise and training to perfect their use and develop power. Cultivate language as, all in all, the greatest of God's worldly gifts to man;—a gift which misuse may turn into a weapon of offence and cruelty,—a very curse to its possessor. Strive for victory with the least exercise of force. Foster the chivalrous feeling of the fencing masters of the old school, who counselled their

pupils to prefer a dexterous thrust from an opponent, to vanquishing him by hacking him to pieces. The school-boy instinct which inspires abhorrence of bullies, ripens in generous manhood to a profound distaste for violence, which always provokes antagonism. Just as the player on an instrument evokes the most thrilling notes with the lightest touches, so the gentlest modulations of speech and the simplest words and phrases go straightest to the heart, and produce the most delicate, yet often the most durable, impressions. Just as the physiologist knows that irritation is opposed to healthy life, so the man of the world knows that nothing enervates and exhausts more than an irritable temper, which is fatal to calm debate. The surgeon knows that gentle pressure soothes, and that the more directly a wound is healed and the less it is irritated, proportionately less will be the tenderness of the scar. That is as true, of moral and sentimental as of physical wounds. Never inflict one if you can help it; and if unhappily you do, take the surgeon's precept to heart. Let healing be your first intention; protect the delicate scar as it consolidates, and never irritate. These are truisms stamped by the traditional sanction of my distinguished predecessors in this chair. If I repeat them, it is because it is impossible to reiterate some truths too often; and those I have just echoed seem especially worthy of remembrance in the present stage of evolution of local life. The great structural improvements which are taking place in our midst, remind us every day of the vastly growing importance which Birmingham is yet destined to attain. Here is the widest scope for the best endeavours of every one. The time may not be very far distant when the few in power who discourage criticism, and treat independence of thought as factious opposition, shall seriously begin to question the statesmanship, the economy, the common sense, and the kindliness of a policy of exclusion. We have just had a terrible reminder, only one of a lamented series, of how truly "it is the pace that kills"—of how short life is. Is it not worth debating, whether the basis cannot be broadened so as to ensure the greater safety of the edifice?—whether

the burden cannot be divided so as to minimise the risk and soothe and prolong the life of the toilers ?

In the tersely eloquent Italian alliteration "Chi non fa non falla"—he who does not do does not err. A thoughtful man prays for the noon and evening of life, that he may repair regretted faults of early and inexperienced days, and be able to complete work, which may leave something more than a fleeting impress in the sands of time. It is melancholy to think how much mellowing experience is lost to the world when a soldier, who has long and honourably been foremost in the fight, is prematurely taken from his loved and loving home, frequently oppressed by trials which might have been spared him, had his antagonists been less fierce and more human,—less profuse in strewing his path with thorns, even though less prodigal in striving to atone by heaping his bier with roses.

Is it not worth debating whether the kindly feeling which only the other day united men of all parties round an illustrious grave, might not be fostered, and allowed free scope to inspire a working truce in our local life? Surely men need not be a whit less earnest because more tolerant, or their motives less pure because they do not call in question those of their opponents.

Need retrospection with the honest desire of rectification involve recrimination? Is violence a necessary attribute of energy, and love of progress incompatible with respect for past achievements? History teaches the very reverse.

A reputation for enterprise and skill, in communities and individuals, is not imperilled but enhanced, by truth, justice, and moderation; and for the lasting enjoyment of all rights, whether of person and property, or of speech and debate, no guarantee is surer, either under the moral or the statute law, than that based on an equitable recognition of the rights and feelings of others.

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