

**BACCALAUREATE
SERMON AND
ORATION AND
POEM: CLASS OF 1870**

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Baccalaureate Sermon and Oration and Poem: Class of 1870 by Various

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VARIOUS

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BACCALAUREATE SERMON

AND

ORATION AND POEM.

—
CLASS OF 1870.
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1870.

Class Committee.



WILLIAM WIGGLESWORTH CHAMBERLIN.

WILLIAM GARDNER HALE.

HORACE GRAY LUNT.



THOMAS BALDWIN TICKNOR, *Class Secretary.*

AUTHORITY.



A

VALEDICTORY SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

GRADUATING CLASS OF HARVARD COLLEGE,

JUNE 19, 1870,

BY ANDREW P. PEABODY.

S E R M O N .

“ONE HAVING AUTHORITY.”—Matthew vii. 29.

ALMOST all questions of belief and conduct are included in the one fundamental question between authority and autonomy. Does there exist anywhere the right to be believed and obeyed? Or are individual consciousness and experience the sole source, test, and ground of truth and duty? If I can help those who are now going to leave us to answer this question wisely, I am sure that the magnitude of the interests involved will make it seem not inappropriate to an occasion like the present.

What is authority? I apprehend that the ambiguity and the misuse of this word occasion not a little of the contempt of authority so rife at the present time. Authority is indeed often employed to denote mere *power*; but it really means *right*,—the right to assent or credence, which sometimes implies, not in itself, but from the nature of the case, the right to obedience or submission. Right is always the basis of authority. Where there is no right, there may be power, but there is no authority. Conversely, right includes and implies authority; it has, for its due, belief, obedience, or both, as the nature of the case may require.

Authority and progress are often set over against each other, as mutually adverse. So far is this from being the case that they are inseparably allied. Where one is not, the other cannot be. Authority is the ground of almost all our knowledge; it has been the essential condition and the sole means of human progress; and it is equally the condition and means of all future progress. I will first illustrate these propositions with reference to science, in which they are undisputed, and then develop their application to morals and religion, in which they are disputed.

We will select the science of chemistry as a test of these propositions. This science, under its Saracenic style of alchymy, had its centuries of nonage and imbecility, first with the Eastern race that gave it its name, and then among the races of Western Europe. The early alchymists found themselves in what seemed a tumultuous chaos of substances and phenomena. They at first made experiments at random, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred with no result save to demonstrate their ignorance. But gradually, as they pursued their researches, a thread of light gleamed here and there on their dense darkness; stray filaments of order revealed themselves in the chaos; approximate laws of chemical combination and action were discovered; provisional theories, embracing the few truths that had been ascertained, were established. These laws, these theories, were received on authority; else every new inquirer must have gone over the whole ground afresh, and would have got no further than his predecessors. But each generation of inquirers mounted as it were on the shoulders of those that had gone before them, availed themselves, in the form of axioms, of the results of antecedent experiment and discovery, and on this basis made their own contributions to the science. Nor did their faith in authority belie itself. The laws once discovered were not negated, but merged in more comprehensive laws. The theories once received were not set aside, but made subsidiary to larger generalizations and broader theories. Each generation of chemists from the middle ages downward has bequeathed its quota to the present advanced stage of the science, and the authority of each, legitimately founded and recognized, has borne an essential part in its progress.

Now, suppose that one of the graduating class, determined to become an adept in chemistry, were to plant himself in the attitude assumed in our day by those who deem themselves the advanced thinkers in morals and religion, and to say, "I abjure all authority. I can take no traditional theories on trust. I have the same implements of investigation that my predecessors had,--- as good hands, brain, intellect as they, and the same limitless field of exploration spread out before me. I will believe nothing that I have not tested and verified for myself; nor will I pay even sufficient respect to the beliefs of other men, to give them a foremost

place in my experiments, or provisional credence till I have proved their falsity." I need not say what the result would be. He might labor through a long lifetime, and would then die as good a chemist as Adam was in his seventieth or eightieth year.

It may be given to some of you, who have studied earnestly and lovingly in the laboratory, to enlarge essentially the bounds of human knowledge in your chosen department. If so, how will you do it? By receiving on authority what is already known; by working upon the basis of antecedent discoveries. These discoveries you will indeed incidentally verify; that knowledge you will confirm by your own experiments; yet your aim will be, not verification, but a deeper research, a more probing analysis, which you can make hopefully and successfully only as you take your stand on well-established authority.

You may say, however, "I yield to authority in these matters of science; because it is concerned merely with human experiments and discoveries; and what one man has found out or learned, another man may believe." Very true. But does it make any difference how he has found it out, or learned it? A chemical revelation is at least conceivable, if not probable. Suppose that, in the utter ignorance that prevailed in the fifteenth century, there had suddenly come forth men who proclaimed, as fundamental truths, the precise laws of chemical combination and action that are recognized now; suppose that these men had averred that the laws they promulgated were made known to them by the Supreme Author of nature; suppose that, from that period to this, the laws thus proclaimed had been in a thousand ways verified, in not a single particular disproved by subsequent observation and experiment,— would they rest on a less firm basis of authority than they do now? Manifestly, no. You would justly say, "God is amply competent to teach men chemistry. Whether it was antecedently probable that he would do so, it is not for us to discuss, when confronted by facts that prove the affirmative. The sudden outblossoming of knowledge from gross ignorance — in itself a miracle — renders it not merely probable, but absolutely certain."

We thus see that this science, and by parity of reason every science, rests on a constantly growing substructure of authority, and that there is no intrinsic impossibility that this substructure, instead of growing by slow accretions, might have been built at