

## 1 Chapter 9. The Illative Sense

2 {343} MY object in the foregoing pages has been, not to form a theory which may  
3 account for those phenomena of the intellect of which they treat, viz. those which  
4 characterize inference and assent, but to ascertain what is the matter of fact as regards  
5 them, that is, when it is that assent is given to propositions which are inferred, and  
6 under what circumstances. I have never had the thought of an attempt which in me  
7 would be ambitious and which has failed in the hands of others,—if that attempt may  
8 fairly be called unsuccessful, which, though made by the acutest minds, has not  
9 succeeded in convincing opponents. Especially have I found myself unequal to  
10 antecedent reasonings in the instance of a matter of fact. There are those, who,  
11 arguing *à priori*, maintain, that, since experience leads by syllogism only to probabilities,  
12 certitude is ever a mistake. There are others, who, while they deny this conclusion,  
13 grant the *à priori* principle assumed in the argument, and in consequence are obliged, in  
14 order to vindicate the certainty of our knowledge, to have recourse to the hypothesis of  
15 intuitions, intellectual forms, and the {344} like, which belong to us by nature, and may  
16 be considered to elevate our experience into something more than it is in itself.  
17 Earnestly maintaining, as I would, with this latter school of philosophers, the certainty of  
18 knowledge, I think it enough to appeal to the common voice of mankind in proof of it.  
19 That is to be accounted a normal operation of our nature, which men in general do  
20 actually instance. That is a law of our minds, which is exemplified in action on a large  
21 scale, whether *à priori* it ought to be a law or no. Our hoping is a proof that hope, as  
22 such, is not an extravagance; and our possession of certitude is a proof that it is not a  
23 weakness or an absurdity to be certain. How it comes about that we can be certain is  
24 not my business to determine; for me it is sufficient that certitude is felt. This is what the  
25 schoolmen, I believe, call treating a subject *in facto esse*, in contrast with *in fieri*. Had I  
26 attempted the latter, I should have been falling into metaphysics; but my aim is of a  
27 practical character, such as that of Butler in his *Analogy*, with this difference, that he  
28 treats of probability, doubt, expedience, and duty, whereas in these pages, without  
29 excluding, far from it, the question of duty, I would confine myself to the truth of things,  
30 and to the mind's certitude of that truth.

31 Certitude is a mental state: certainty is a quality of propositions. Those propositions I  
32 call certain, which are such that I am certain of them. Certitude is not a passive  
33 impression made upon the mind from without, by argumentative compulsion, but in all  
34 concrete questions (nay, even in abstract, for though the reasoning is {345} abstract,  
35 the mind which judges of it is concrete) it is an active recognition of propositions as true,  
36 such as it is the duty of each individual himself to exercise at the bidding of reason, and,  
37 when reason forbids, to withhold. And reason never bids us be certain except on an  
38 absolute proof; and such a proof can never be furnished to us by the logic of words, for  
39 as certitude is of the mind, so is the act of inference which leads to it. Every one who  
40 reasons, is his own centre; and no expedient for attaining a common measure of minds  
41 can reverse this truth;—but then the question follows, is there any *criterion* of the  
42 accuracy of an inference, such as may be our warrant that certitude is rightly elicited in  
43 favour of the proposition inferred, since our warrant cannot, as I have said, be scientific?  
44 I have already said that the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in

concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense, a use of the word "sense" parallel to our use of it in "good sense," "common sense," a "sense of beauty," &c.;—and I own I do not see any way to go farther than this in answer to the question. However, I can at least explain my meaning more fully; and therefore I will now speak, first of the sanction of the Illative Sense, next of its nature, and then of its range. {346}

## § 1. The Sanction of the Illative Sense

WE are in a world of facts, and we use them; for there is nothing else to use. We do not quarrel with them, but we take them as they are, and avail ourselves of what they can do for us. It would be out of place to demand of fire, water, earth, and air their credentials, so to say, for acting upon us, or ministering to us. We call them elements, and turn them to account, and make the most of them. We speculate on them at our leisure. But what we are still less able to doubt about or annul, at our leisure or not, is that which is at once their counterpart and their witness, I mean, ourselves. We are conscious of the objects of external nature, and we reflect and act upon them, and this consciousness, reflection, and action we call our rationality. And as we use the (so called) elements without first criticizing what we have no command over, so is it much more unmeaning in us to criticize or find fault with our own nature, which is nothing else than we ourselves, instead of using it according to the use of which it ordinarily admits. Our being, with its faculties, mind and body, is a fact not admitting of question, all things being of necessity referred to it, not it to other things. {347}

If I may not assume that I exist, and in a particular way, that is, with a particular mental constitution, I have nothing to speculate about, and had better let speculation alone. Such as I am, it is my all; this is my essential stand-point, and must be taken for granted; otherwise, thought is but an idle amusement, not worth the trouble. There is no medium between using my faculties, as I have them, and flinging myself upon the external world according to the random impulse of the moment, as spray upon the surface of the waves, and simply forgetting that I am.

I am what I am, or I am nothing. I cannot think, reflect, or judge about my being, without starting from the very point which I aim at concluding. My ideas are all assumptions, and I am ever moving in a circle. I cannot avoid being sufficient for myself, for I cannot make myself anything else, and to change me is to destroy me. If I do not use myself, I have no other self to use. My only business is to ascertain what I am, in order to put it to use. It is enough for the proof of the value and authority of any function which I possess, to be able to pronounce that it is natural. What I have to ascertain is the laws under which I live. My first elementary lesson of duty is that of resignation to the laws of my nature, whatever they are; my first disobedience is to be impatient at what I am, and to indulge an ambitious aspiration after what I cannot be, to cherish a distrust of my powers, and to desire to change laws which are identical with myself. {348}

Truths such as these, which are too obvious to be called irresistible, are illustrated by what we see in universal nature. Every being is in a true sense sufficient for itself, so as

86 to be able to fulfil its particular needs. It is a general law that, whatever is found as a  
87 function or an attribute of any class of beings, or is natural to it, is in its substance  
88 suitable to it, and subserves its existence, and cannot be rightly regarded as a fault or  
89 enormity. No being could endure, of which the constituent parts were at war with each  
90 other. And more than this; there is that principle of vitality in every being, which is of a  
91 sanative and restorative character, and which brings all its parts and functions together  
92 into one whole, and is ever repelling and correcting the mischiefs which befall it,  
93 whether from within or without, while showing no tendency to cast off its belongings as if  
94 foreign to its nature. The brute animals are found severally with limbs and organs,  
95 habits, instincts, appetites, surroundings, which play together for the safety and welfare  
96 of the whole; and, after all exceptions, may be said each of them to have, after its own  
97 kind, a perfection of nature. Man is the highest of the animals, and more indeed than an  
98 animal, as having a mind; that is, he has a complex nature different from theirs, with a  
99 higher aim and a specific perfection; but still the fact that other beings find their good in  
100 the use of their particular nature, is a reason for anticipating that to use duly our own is  
101 our interest as well is our necessity.

102 What is the peculiarity of our nature, in contrast {349} with the inferior animals around  
103 us? It is that, though man cannot change what he is born with, he is a being of progress  
104 with relation to his perfection and characteristic good. Other beings are complete from  
105 their first existence, in that line of excellence which is allotted to them; but man begins  
106 with nothing realized (to use the word), and he has to make capital for himself by the  
107 exercise of those faculties which are his natural inheritance. Thus he gradually  
108 advances to the fulness of his original destiny. Nor is this progress mechanical, nor is it  
109 of necessity; it is committed to the personal efforts of each individual of the species;  
110 each of us has the prerogative of completing his inchoate and rudimental nature, and of  
111 developing his own perfection out of the living elements with which his mind began to  
112 be. It is his gift to be the creator of his own sufficiency; and to be emphatically self-  
113 made. This is the law of his being, which he cannot escape; and whatever is involved in  
114 that law he is bound, or rather he is carried on, to fulfil.

115 And here I am brought to the bearing of these remarks upon my subject. For this law of  
116 progress is carried out by means of the acquisition of knowledge, of which inference  
117 and assent are the immediate instruments. Supposing, then, the advancement of our  
118 nature, both in ourselves individually and as regards the human family, is, to every one  
119 of us in his place, a sacred duty, it follows that that duty is intimately bound up with the  
120 right use of these two main instruments of fulfilling it. And as we do not gain the  
121 knowledge of the law of progress by any *à priori* view {350} of man, but by looking at it  
122 as the interpretation which is provided by himself on a large scale in the ordinary action  
123 of his intellectual nature, so too we must appeal to himself, as a fact, and not to any  
124 antecedent theory, in order to find what is the law of his mind as regards the two  
125 faculties in question. If then such an appeal does bear me out in deciding, as I have  
126 done, that the course of inference is ever more or less obscure, while assent is ever  
127 distinct and definite, and yet that what is in its nature thus absolute does, in fact follow  
128 upon what in outward manifestation is thus complex, indirect, and recondite, what is left  
129 to us but to take things as they are, and to resign ourselves to what we find? that is,

130 instead of devising, what cannot be, some sufficient science of reasoning which may  
131 compel certitude in concrete conclusions, to confess that there is no ultimate test of  
132 truth besides the testimony born to truth by the mind itself, and that this phenomenon,  
133 perplexing as we may find it, is a normal and inevitable characteristic of the mental  
134 constitution of a being like man on a stage such as the world. His progress is a living  
135 growth, not a mechanism; and its instruments are mental acts, not the formulas and  
136 contrivances of language.

137 We are accustomed in this day to lay great stress upon the harmony of the universe;  
138 and we have well learned the maxim so powerfully inculcated by our own English  
139 philosopher, that in our inquiries into its laws, we must sternly destroy all idols of the  
140 intellect, and subdue nature by co-operating with her. Knowledge is power, for it  
141 enables us to use eternal principles {351} which we cannot alter. So also is it in that  
142 microcosm, the human mind. Let us follow Bacon more closely than to distort its  
143 faculties according to the demands of an ideal optimism, instead of looking out for  
144 modes of thought proper to our nature, and faithfully observing them in our intellectual  
145 exercises.

146 Of course I do not stop here. As the structure of the universe speaks to us of Him who  
147 made it, so the laws of the mind are the expression, not of mere constituted order, but of  
148 His will. I should be bound by them even were they not His laws; but since one of their  
149 very functions is to tell me of Him, they throw a reflex light upon themselves, and, for  
150 resignation to my destiny, I substitute a cheerful concurrence in an overruling  
151 Providence. We may gladly welcome such difficulties as are to be found in our mental  
152 constitution, and in the interaction of our faculties, if we are able to feel that He gave  
153 them to us, and He can overrule them for us. We may securely take them as they are,  
154 and use them as we find them. It is He who teaches us all knowledge; and the way by  
155 which we acquire it is His way. He varies that way according to the subject-matter; but  
156 whether He has set before us in our particular pursuit the way of observation or of  
157 experiment, of speculation or of research, of demonstration or of probability, whether we  
158 are inquiring into the system of the universe, or into the elements of matter and of life, or  
159 into the history of human society and past times, if we take the way proper to our  
160 subject-matter, we have His blessing upon us, and shall find, besides abundant matter  
161 for {352} mere opinion, the materials in due measure of proof and assent.

162 And especially, by this disposition of things, shall we learn, as regards religious and  
163 ethical inquiries, how little we can effect, however much we exert ourselves, without that  
164 Blessing; for, as if on set purpose, He has made this path of thought rugged and  
165 circuitous above other investigations, that the very discipline inflicted on our minds in  
166 finding Him, may mould them into due devotion to Him when He is found. "Verily Thou  
167 art a hidden God, the God of Israel, the Saviour," is the very law of His dealings with us.  
168 Certainly we need a clue into the labyrinth which is to lead us to Him; and who among  
169 us can hope to seize upon the true starting-points of thought for that enterprise, and  
170 upon all of them, who is to understand their right direction, to follow them out to their just  
171 limits, and duly to estimate, adjust, and combine the various reasonings in which they  
172 issue, so as safely to arrive at what it is worth any labour to secure, without a special

173 illumination from Himself? Such are the dealings of Wisdom with the elect soul. "She will  
174 bring upon him fear, and dread, and trial; and She will torture him with the tribulation of  
175 Her discipline, till She try him by Her laws, and trust his soul. Then She will strengthen  
176 him, and make Her way straight to him, and give him joy." {353}

## 177 § 2. The Nature of the Illative Sense

178 IT is the mind that reasons, and that controls its own reasonings, not any technical  
179 apparatus of words and propositions. This power of judging and concluding, when in its  
180 perfection, I call the Illative Sense, and I shall best illustrate it by referring to parallel  
181 faculties, which we commonly recognize without difficulty.

182 For instance, how does the mind fulfil its function of supreme direction and control, in  
183 matters of duty, social intercourse, and taste? In all of these separate actions of the  
184 intellect, the individual is supreme, and responsible to himself, nay, under  
185 circumstances, may be justified in opposing himself to the judgment of the whole world;  
186 though he uses rules to his great advantage, as far as they go, and is in consequence  
187 bound to use them. As regards moral duty, the subject is fully considered in the well-  
188 known ethical treatises of Aristotle [\[Note 1\]](#). He calls the faculty which {354} guides the  
189 mind in matters of conduct, by the name of *phronesis*, or judgment. This is the directing,  
190 controlling, and determining principle in such matters, personal and social. What it is to  
191 be virtuous, how we are to gain the just idea and standard of virtue, how we are to  
192 approximate in practice to our own standard, what is right and wrong in a particular  
193 case, for the answers in fulness and accuracy to these and similar questions, the  
194 philosopher refers us to no code of laws, to no moral treatise, because no science of  
195 life, applicable to the case of an individual, has been or can be written. Such is  
196 Aristotle's doctrine, and it is undoubtedly true. An ethical system may supply laws,  
197 general rules, guiding principles, a number of examples, suggestions, landmarks,  
198 limitations, cautions, distinctions, solutions of critical or anxious difficulties; but who is to  
199 apply them to a particular case? whither can we go, except to the living intellect, our  
200 own, or another's? What is written is too vague, too negative for our need. It bids us  
201 avoid extremes; but it cannot ascertain for us, according to our personal need, the  
202 golden mean. The authoritative oracle, which is to decide our path, is something more  
203 searching and manifold than such jejune generalizations as treatises can give, which  
204 are most distinct and clear when we least need them. It is seated in the mind of the  
205 individual, who is thus his own law, his own teacher, and his own judge in those special  
206 cases of duty which are personal to him. It comes of an acquired habit, though it has its  
207 first origin in nature itself, and it is formed and matured by practice and {355}  
208 experience; and it manifests itself, not in any breadth of view, any philosophical  
209 comprehension of the mutual relations of duty towards duty, or any consistency in its  
210 teachings, but it is a capacity sufficient for the occasion, deciding what ought to be done  
211 here and now, by this given person, under these given circumstances. It decides  
212 nothing hypothetical, it does not determine what a man should do ten years hence, or  
213 what another should do at this time. It may indeed happen to decide ten years hence as  
214 it does now, and to decide a second case now as it now decides a first; still its present  
215 act is for the present, not for the distant or the future.

216 State or public law is inflexible, but this mental rule is not only minute and particular, but  
217 has an elasticity, which, in its application to individual cases, is, as I have said, not  
218 studious to maintain the appearance of consistency. In old times the mason's rule which  
219 was in use at Lesbos was, according to Aristotle, not of wood or iron, but of lead, so as  
220 to allow of its adjustment to the uneven surface of the stones brought together for the  
221 work. By such the philosopher illustrates the nature of equity in contrast with law, and  
222 such is that *phronesis*, from which the science of morals forms its rules, and receives its  
223 complement.

224 In this respect of course the law of truth differs from the law of duty, that duties change,  
225 but truths never; but, though truth is ever one and the same, and the assent of certitude  
226 is immutable, still the reasonings which carry us on to truth and certitude are many and  
227 distinct, and vary with the inquirer; {356} and it is not with assent, but with the controlling  
228 principle in inferences that I am comparing *phronesis*. It is with this drift that I observe  
229 that the rule of conduct for one man is not always the rule for another, though the rule is  
230 always one and the same in the abstract, and in its principle and scope. To learn his  
231 own duty in his own case, each individual must have recourse to his own rule; and if his  
232 rule is not sufficiently developed in his intellect for his need, then he goes to some other  
233 living, present authority, to supply it for him, not to the dead letter of a treatise or a code.  
234 A living, present authority, himself or another, is his immediate guide in matters of a  
235 personal, social, or political character. In buying and selling, in contracts, in his  
236 treatment of others, in giving and receiving, in thinking, speaking, doing, and working, in  
237 toil, in danger, in his recreations and pleasures, every one of his acts, to be  
238 praiseworthy, must be in accordance with this practical sense. Thus it is, and not by  
239 science, that he perfects the virtues of justice, self-command, magnanimity, generosity,  
240 gentleness, and all others. *Phronesis* is the regulating principle of every one of them.

241 These last words lead me to a further remark. I doubt whether it is correct, strictly  
242 speaking, to consider this *phronesis* as a general faculty, directing and perfecting all the  
243 virtues at once. So understood, it is little better than an abstract term, including under it  
244 a circle of analogous faculties severally proper to the separate virtues. Properly  
245 speaking, there are as many kinds of *phronesis* as there are virtues: for the {357}  
246 judgment, good sense, or tact which is conspicuous in a man's conduct in one subject-  
247 matter, is not necessarily traceable in another. As in the parallel cases of memory and  
248 reasoning, he may be great in one aspect of his character, and little-minded in another.  
249 He may be exemplary in his family, yet commit a fraud on the revenue; he may be just  
250 and cruel, brave and sensual, imprudent and patient. And if this be true of the moral  
251 virtues, it holds good still more fully when we compare what is called his private  
252 character with his public. A good man may make a bad king; profligates have been  
253 great statesmen, or magnanimous political leaders.

254 So, too, I may go on to speak of the various callings and professions which give scope  
255 to the exercise of great talents, for these talents also are matured, not by mere rule, but  
256 by personal skill and sagacity. They are as diverse as pleading and cross-examining,  
257 conducting a debate in Parliament, swaying a public meeting, and commanding an  
258 army; and here, too, I observe that, though the directing principle in each case is called

259 by the same name,—sagacity, skill, tact, or prudence,—still there is no one ruling faculty  
260 leading to eminence in all these various lines of action in common, but men will excel in  
261 one of them, without any talent for the rest.

262 The parallel may be continued in the case of the Fine Arts, in which, though true and  
263 scientific rules may be given, no one would therefore deny that Phidias or Rafael had a  
264 far more subtle standard of taste and a more versatile power of embodying it in his  
265 {358} works, than any which he could communicate to others in even a series of  
266 treatises. And here again genius is indissolubly united to one definite subject-matter; a  
267 poet is not therefore a painter, or an architect a musical composer.

268 And so, again, as regards the useful arts and personal accomplishments, we use the  
269 same word "skill," but proficiency in engineering or in ship-building, or again in  
270 engraving, or again in singing, in playing instruments, in acting, or in gymnastic  
271 exercises, is as simply one with its particular subject-matter, as the human soul with its  
272 particular body, and is, in its own department, a sort of instinct or inspiration, not an  
273 obedience to external rules of criticism or of science.

274 It is natural, then, to ask the question, why ratiocination should be an exception to a  
275 general law which attaches to the intellectual exercises of the mind; why it is held to be  
276 commensurate with logical science; and why logic is made an instrumental art sufficient  
277 for determining every sort of truth, while no one would dream of making any one  
278 formula, however generalized, a working rule at once for poetry, the art of medicine, and  
279 political warfare?

280 This is what I have to remark concerning the Illative Sense, and in explanation of its  
281 nature and claims; and on the whole, I have spoken of it in four respects,—as viewed in  
282 itself, in its subject-matter, in the process it uses, and in its function and scope.

283 First, viewed in its exercise, it is one and the same in all concrete matters, though  
284 employed in them in different measures. We do not reason in one way in {359}  
285 chemistry or law, in another in morals or religion; but in reasoning on any subject  
286 whatever, which is concrete, we proceed, as far indeed as we can, by the logic of  
287 language, but we are obliged to supplement it by the more subtle and elastic logic of  
288 thought; for forms by themselves prove nothing.

289 Secondly, it is in fact attached to definite subject-matters, so that a given individual may  
290 possess it in one department of thought, for instance, history, and not in another, for  
291 instance, philosophy.

292 Thirdly, in coming to its conclusion, it proceeds always in the same way, by a method of  
293 reasoning, which, as I have observed above, is the elementary principle of that  
294 mathematical calculus of modern times, which has so wonderfully extended the limits of  
295 abstract science.

296 Fourthly, in no class of concrete reasonings, whether in experimental science, historical  
297 research, or theology, is there any ultimate test of truth and error in our inferences  
298 besides the trustworthiness of the Illative Sense that gives them its sanction; just as  
299 there is no sufficient test of poetical excellence, heroic action, or gentleman-like  
300 conduct, other than the particular mental sense, be it genius, taste, sense of propriety,  
301 or the moral sense, to which those subject-matters are severally committed. Our duty in  
302 each of these is to strengthen and perfect the special faculty which is its living rule, and  
303 in every case as it comes to do our best. And such also is our duty and our necessity,  
304 as regards the Illative Sense. {360}