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MEMOIR OF BLUMENBACH

BY

M. FLOURENS¹.

SOME years since died at Göttingen a member of our Academy, whose great works have rendered him famous, and whose particular works, applied to the new study of man himself, have rendered dear to humanity. It is to M. Blumenbach that our age owes Anthropology. The history of mankind had been disfigured by errors of every kind, physical, social and moral. A sage appeared. He contended against the physical errors; and, by so doing, destroyed in the surest manner the foundation of all the others.

John Frederick Blumenbach was born at Gotha, in 1752. From his very birth nature seemed to devote him to education. His father was professor at Gotha; his mother belonged to a family at Jena, which was attached to the universities.

It was in one of those German interiors, where the love of retirement, the necessity of study, the habits of an honourable independence reign with such a charm, that the little Blumenbach first saw the light. A brother, a sister, a father studious and grave, a mother tender and enlightened, formed at first all his world. It was soon observed that this child, surrounded by such soft affections, was occupied by quite a dreamy curiosity. It played but little, and began to observe very early. It endeavoured, and sometimes with great ingenuity, to comprehend or to explain to itself the structure of a plant or an insect.

Everything is taken seriously in Germany, even the earliest education of the infant. The father of M. Blumenbach, who

¹ *Mémoires de l'Institut de France*, Tom. xxi. p. 1. Paris. 1847.

intended him for education, never permitted him, even from the most tender age, to break short a sentence badly commenced in order to put something else in its place. The sentence badly commenced had to be finished. The child had to get itself out of the little difficulty it had got into. In this way it learnt naturally, without effort, or rather by scarcely appreciable efforts, to think clearly and express itself with precision.

His mother, a woman of elevated spirit and noble heart, inspired him with ideas of glory. The soul of the mother is the destiny of her son. These first impressions have never ceased to influence the whole life of M. Blumenbach. Of his numerous writings there is only one which is foreign to the sciences, and that is the panegyric of his mother. He ends it by saying, "She had all, and knew how to cherish all the family virtues."

To return to the child. At ten years old he already took up the subject of comparative osteology, and this was the way. There was then but one solitary skeleton in the town of Gotha. This skeleton belonged to a doctor, who was the friend of the family of our little scholar, who often told afterwards the story of the many visits he used to make, during which he took no notice of the doctor, but a great deal of the skeleton. His visits became, by little and little, more assiduous and more frequent. He came, on purpose, when his old friend was out; and, under pretence of waiting for him, spent whole hours in looking at the skeleton. After having well fixed in his memory the form of the different bones and their relations, he conceived the bold idea of composing a copy. For this purpose he made frequent journeys in the night to the cemeteries. But, as he was determined to owe nothing except to chance, he soon found out that he would have to content himself with the bones of our domestic animals. In consequence, he directed his private researches in such a way as to provide himself with all sorts of that kind of bones. Then he carried them all to his bed-room, concealed them as well as he could, and shut himself too up there, in order to give himself up at his leisure, and with an enthusiasm beyond his age, to the studies he had marked out for himself.

Unfortunately, at last a servant discovered the child's secret treasure; she saw that ingenious commencement of a *human skeleton*, and cried out sacrilege and scandal. Young Blumenbach, all in tears, ran to his mother; and she, under the advice of the good doctor, prudently decided that the precious collection should be removed into one of the lofts. Such was the modest beginning of the famous collection whose reputation has become universal.

At seventeen, young Blumenbach quitted his family for the University of Jena. There he found Sömmerring: the same age, the same tastes, the same passion for study, which already concealed another, that for fame. They soon became friends; and for these two friends everything was in common, library and laboratory. Blumenbach lent his books; Sömmerring lent his anatomical preparations. In their confidential intimacies they often allowed themselves to give way to their illusions, predicting for one another the first rank in the sciences they cultivated. Nor were they deceived; the one became the first naturalist, the other the first anatomist of Germany.

After spending three years at Jena, Blumenbach went to the university of Göttingen, then famous for the residence of a great man, the great Haller, one of the grandest geniuses science has ever had; a first-rate author, poet, profound anatomist, a botanist equal to Linnæus in his way, a physiologist without parallel, and of an erudition almost unlimited. Haller indeed had left the place; but his reputation was everywhere. At the sight of reputation the cry of genius is always the same; and Blumenbach said with Correggio, "I too am a painter."

There lived then, at Göttingen, an old professor, forgotten by the students and very oblivious himself of delivering lectures, but in other respects very learned, and, besides, the possessor of an immense collection, remarkable for its books of geography, philology, voyages, and pictures of distant nations. Young Blumenbach, who was already dreaming of a history of man, was delighted at finding materials of this kind, so laboriously and diligently brought together. He foresaw with a singular clearness all the advantages that might be got from it.

He listened to and admired the old professor; and let him go on talking for a whole twelvemonth; then, rich with these treasures of erudition, of history, and continuous studies of the physiognomy of peoples, he wrote his doctor's dissertation on *The Unity of Mankind*.

This was quite a new way of opening the science which he was destined to found and to render attractive. He commenced from that time his anthropological collection. He did more; he got the University to buy the collections of his old master, he became their conservator, he arranged them; and very soon brought them into notice by the great instruction in natural history he added to them. His teaching in this way marks quite an epoch in the studies of Germany.

The peculiar genius of that nation is well known; the genius of thought governed by imagination; devoted at once to truth and to systems; brilliant, and rejoicing in elevated combinations, bold, surprising, and, if I may use the expression, given up to the adventures of thought. M. Blumenbach was no exception to this genius; but he developed, with a wonderful good nature, all the wisest points of it.

The fifty years during which he was professor, and, if I may say so, a kind of sovereign, was, for natural history in Germany, the time of the most positive and the soundest study. The day of systems did not re-appear till he was gone; and when they did, although recalled to life by a man of astonishing vigour of mind¹, they never could regain the empire they had lost. They had to deal with an entirely new power. The *experimental method* had been established. The great revolution which has made the modern human intellect what it is had been effected.

M. Blumenbach has published four works which give us pretty well the whole of his great course of instruction: the first, on *The Human Species*²; the second, on *Natural History*;

¹ M. Oken. I speak here of systems, and especially of the philosophy of nature, only in reference to the study of the Animal Kingdom.

² I include, under this head, his dissertation, *De Generis humani varietate nativa, &c.*, and his *Decades craniorum, &c.*

the third, on *Physiology*; and the fourth, on *Comparative Anatomy*.

To form a proper opinion of these works, it is necessary to consider the time when they appeared. About the middle of the eighteenth century, Buffon, Linnæus and Haller had founded modern natural history. Towards the end of the century, at the very moment when science lost these three great men, M. Blumenbach wrote his first work¹.

The glory of M. Blumenbach is that he preceded Cuvier. There was indeed between these two famous men more than one relation; both introduced *Comparative Anatomy* into their own country, both created a new science; the one, Anthropology; the other, the science of Fossil Anatomy: both conceived the science of Animal Organization in its entirety; but G. Cuvier, impelled by a greater bias towards abstract combinations, did more to display a method; whilst Blumenbach, guided by a most delicate sensibility, did more to elucidate physiology.

Everything belonging to method was neglected by Blumenbach; he confined himself to following Linnæus; he adopted from him almost all his *divisions* with whatever advantages they had, and also with all their defects, their narrowness of study, and their caprice.

In Germany, where they will not easily admit that M. Blumenbach was deficient in anything, this kind of forgetfulness with which that great intellect treated method is explained and excused by his deference for Linnæus, the master, in that way, of a whole century. In France, where greater liberty of speech is allowed, without going beyond the bounds of respect, we say, plainly enough, that Blumenbach had not the genius of *method*; a genius so rare, that Aristotle alone, of antiquity, possessed it; and only three or four men in modern times have

¹ His dissertation, *De Generis humani varietate nativa*, is of 1775; his *Manuel d'Histoire Naturelle* is of 1779; his *Manuel de Physiologie*, of 1787; his works on the *Animaux à sang chaud et à sang froid*, on the *Animaux à sang chaud vivipares et ovipares*, are of 1786 and 1789; his first *Decas craniorum*, of 1790; his *Anatomie comparée*, of 1805.

had it in so high a degree, Linnæus, the two Jussieu and G. Cuvier.

All the writings of M. Blumenbach indicate the character and, if I may say so, the stamp of the physiologist. In his *Comparative Anatomy* he arranges his facts according to the organs, which is pre-eminently the physiological order. In the *Physiology*, properly so called, he first of all considers the *forces of life*, which is the point of view at once the most elevated and the most essentially peculiar to that science. His works on the cold-blooded and hot-blooded animals, and on the hot-blooded viviparous and oviparous animals are a true *Comparative Physiology*, and that too at an epoch when the very name of that science was unknown¹. He has submitted the great question of the *formation of beings* to the most profound researches², and always as a physiologist. Facts were his study; and from facts he tried to mount up to the force which produced them. Nothing is more famous than the formative force of M. Blumenbach³.

Three principal ideas about the formation of beings have been successively in vogue; the idea of *spontaneous generation*, which was the idea, or rather the error, of all antiquity; the idea of the *pre-existence of germs*, conceived by Leibnitz, and popularized by Bonnet; and the idea of the formative force of M. Blumenbach. No doubt the new idea does not clear up the difficulty any more than the two others; but at least it does not add to it. It does not contradict the facts, like the idea of spontaneous generation; nor does it exact of the mind all that mob of suppositions and concessions which is demanded by the idea of the pre-existence of germs⁴.

The *formative force* of M. Blumenbach is only a mode of expressing a fact, like *irritability* or *sensibility*; and whatever

¹ I consider him to be the first who employed in his works the terms "cold-blooded" and "hot-blooded animals."

² And through them he made the beautiful discovery of the *umbilical membrane* of the mammals.

³ His *Nisus formativus*.

⁴ The *Molécules organiques* of Buffon are only the *pre-existing germs* in another form. See my *Hist. des travaux et des idées de Buffon*, pp. 64, 72.

may be said of it, is not more obscure. Every *original force* is obscure for the very reason that it is *original*. "The first veil," says Fontenelle, "which covered the Isis of the Egyptians has been lifted a long time; a second, if you please, has been so in our time; a third never will be, if it is really the last¹."

Great studies absorb those who pursue them. Blumenbach travelled little. His labours were only interrupted by some journeys in the interior of his country; and what was remarkable, these very journeys were of just as much use to natural history as his works. The old Germany, with its old chateaux, seemed to pay no homage to science; still the lords of these ancient and noble mansions had long since made it a business, and almost a point of honour, to form with care what were called Cabinets of Curiosities. Their successors, attracted by the warlike tastes of the great Frederick, had forgotten these collections. Blumenbach came and reclaimed these treasures in the name of science, and everything was granted to him. Natural history began everywhere to have its museums, and so had civil history; and all this was due to what Blumenbach used to call, laughingly, his *Voyages of Discovery*.

Of all these collections, the most peculiar to Blumenbach, the most important, the most precious at least for its object, was his collection of human skulls; an admirable monument of sagacity, labour and patience, and the best established and surest foundation of the new science, which interests us all to-day, of Anthropology. Anthropology sprung from a great thought of Buffon. Up to his time man had never been studied, except as an individual; Buffon was the first who, in man, studied the species².

After Buffon came Camper. Buffon had only considered the colour, the physiognomy, the exterior traits, the *superficial characteristics* of peoples; Camper, more of an anatomist, considered the more real characteristics. With Camper began the study of skulls. Camper had a quick apprehension, and was as

¹ Panegyric of Ruysch.

² See *Hist. des travaux et des idées de Buffon*, p. 164.

ready at seizing a happy view as prompt to abandon it. He compared the skull of the European with that of the negro; the skull of the negro with that of the orang-utan; he struck out the idea of his facial angle, and very soon greatly exaggerated its importance.

Blumenbach has pointed out what a very unsatisfactory and incomplete characteristic the facial angle is; he has shown that we must compare all the skull and all the face; he has laid down rules for that learned and perfect comparison, and was the first to deduce that division which is almost everywhere now adopted, of the human species into five races; the European, or white race; the Asiatic, or yellow; the African, or black; the American, or red; and the Malay.

I confess at once, and without difficulty, that this division of races is not perfect. The division of races is the real difficulty of the day, the obscure problem of Anthropology, and will be so for a long time. The Malay race is not a simple or a single race¹. Precise characteristics have been sought, but not yet found, by which to describe the American race. There are three principal races, of which all the others are only *varieties*, or *sub-races*; I mean the three races of Europe, Asia and Africa. But the idea, the grand idea, which reigns and rules and predominates throughout in the admirable studies of Blumenbach is the idea of the unity of the human species, or, as it has also been expressed, of the human genus. Blumenbach was the first who wrote a book under the express title of the *Unity of the Human Genus*².

The *Unity of Mankind* is the great result of the science of Blumenbach, and the great result of all natural history. Antiquity never had any but the most confused ideas on the physical constitution of man. Pliny talks seriously of peoples with only one leg, of others whose eyes were on their shoulders,

¹ But a mixture of two others, the Caucasian and the Mongol.

² Blumenbach says Human Genus. We now say, what is much preferable, the Human Species. The use of these two words is no longer arbitrary. The characteristic of genus is limited fecundity; the characteristic of species is unlimited fecundity. See *Hist. des. t. et des i. de Buffon*, p. 177.

or who had no head, &c. In the sixteenth century, Rondelet, an excellent naturalist, gravely describes sea-men, who live in the water, and have scales and an oozy beard. In the eighteenth century Maupertuis describes the Patagonians, as giants whose ideas ought to correspond to their stature; but as a compensation, for the credit of the century, Voltaire laughed at Maupertuis. Finally, what speaks volumes, Linnæus, the great Linnæus, puts into the same family man and the orang-utan. The *homo nocturnus*, the *homo troglodytes*, the *homo sylvestris* of Linnæus is, in fact, the orang-utan.

To raise the science out of this chaos, Blumenbach laid down first of all three rules. The first is, to draw a distinction everywhere between what belongs to the brute and what belongs to man. A profound interval, without connexion, without passage, separates the human species from all others. No other species comes near the human species; no genus even, or family. The human species stands alone. Guided by his facial angle, Camper approximated the orang-utan to the negro. He saw the shape of the skull¹, which gives an apparent resemblance; he failed to see the capacity of the skull, which makes the real difference. In form nearly, the skull of the negro is as the skull of the European; the capacity of the two skulls is the same. And what is much more essential, their brain is absolutely the same. And, besides, what has the brain to do with the matter? The human mind is one. The soul is one. In spite of its misfortunes, the African race has had heroes of all kinds. Blumenbach, who has collected everything in its favour, reckons among it the most humane and the bravest men; authors, learned men and poets. He had a library entirely composed of books written by negroes. Our age will doubtless witness the end of an odious traffic. Philanthropy, science, politics, that is true politics, all join in attacking it; humanity will not be without its crusades. The second rule of Blumenbach is, not to admit any fact except when supported

¹ Or, more precisely, the form and prominence of the upper jaw. See *Hist. des t. et des i. de Buffon*, p. 183.

by trustworthy documents; and in this way, everything which is puerile and exaggerated, everything which is legend, will be excluded from science. The third rule is the very basis of science. Once nothing but extremes were compared; Blumenbach laid down the rule not to pass from one extreme to the other, except by all the intermediate terms and all the shades possible. The extreme cases seem to separate the human species into decided races; the graduated shades, the continuous intermediate terms make all men to form but one mankind.

There never was a scholar, author or philosopher, who seemed more adapted to endow us with the admirable science of Anthropology. Blumenbach joined to vast knowledge a power of criticism still rarer than the most unbounded erudition, and much more precious; he had that art which discriminates and judges; he had a clear sweep of view, a sure tact, and a good sense not easily deceived. He knew everything, and had read everything; histories, chronicles, relations, travels, &c.; and he took pleasure in saying, that it was from travels that he had received the most instruction.* The study of man is founded on three sciences, besides anthropology properly so called: geography, philology and history. Geography gives us the relations of races to climates; history teaches us to follow the migrations of peoples and their intermixtures; and when once they have been mixed, it is philology which teaches us how to separate them again. But whatever be the progress which these three sciences have made in our days, none has yet arrived at the original and certain unity of man; each foresees it and prophesies it; all tend in that direction; thanks to Blumenbach, that unity, which these sciences still are in search of, has been demonstrated by natural history. And here let me speak out, without being afraid of exaggeration. Voltaire says of Montesquieu, that he restored its lost rights to the human race. The human race had forgotten its original unity, and Blumenbach restored it.

I have examined the principal works of Blumenbach; I mean those works which have made him famous; but there is another I cannot omit, a work very different from those, at

least, in the form; a work full of ideas, and one of the most intellectual, the most discriminating, or, to speak like Descartes, the most sensible that have ever been written on the sciences. That work is composed of two little volumes. The title is very simple, that is, *Contributions to Natural History*¹. The true title should be, *The Philosophy of Natural History*. There Blumenbach passes in review all the philosophical questions of his science; the question of the original unity of man, the question of the scale of beings, that of innate ideas, that of the so-called man of nature, and the others. The author's object is to point out, in each instance, where the truth ends and system commences. And to get to that point, there is no apparatus of learning, no long ratiocination, no phrases; a word, a witty sally, an anecdote are enough. As to the original unity of man, he says it was an honest German doctor, who not being able to reconcile the different colour of men with the fact of their single origin, imagined, in order to settle the question, that God had created two Adams, one white and the other black. As to the scale of beings, it was the opinion of an English naturalist, who proposed to establish two, in order to place in the second everything that could find no place in the first. As to innate ideas and the man of nature, the following are the facts. Towards the middle of the year 1724, there was found, in the north of Germany, near a village called Hameln, a young boy quite naked, who could not speak, but eagerly devoured all the fruits he could get hold of. At that time the dispute about innate ideas was at its highest. Immediately the imagination of the philosophers was excited. The man that had been found was no doubt the wild man, the man of nature; and the man of nature would finally resolve the problem of innate ideas. The Count de Zinzendorf, who was afterwards the founder of the Moravian brothers, hastened to ask him of the Elector of Hanover. The Elector of Hanover sent him to England. In England the curiosity was as great as in Germany. Peter de Hameln, as the young savage was

¹ [Edited in this volume. Ed.]

called, became famous. Dr Arbuthnot wrote his life. After him Lord Monboddo wrote it again; and, with his usual enthusiasm, proclaimed the young savage as the most important discovery of the age. At last, M. Blumenbach wished in his turn to see what it all was; he undertook the examination of the facts as a philosopher, but as a calm and judicious one; and he found that the wild man, the so-called man of nature, the most important discovery of the age, was only a poor child, born dumb, and driven from the paternal roof by a step-mother.

It will be seen what sort of book it is I am speaking about. The tone is that of learned and delicate raillery. The author rallies, but so as to make you think. It is the ironical philosophy of Socrates, or at least what Socrates is said to have had, and what Voltaire really possessed. He who has read that book has the whole key to Blumenbach's character. He will understand the charm of his conversations, the success of his lessons, and his vast renown, so dear to all those who approached him. Above all, he will have the secret of his soul, born essentially for that general virtue defined by Montesquieu, *the love of all*. Even in this book, where however raillery predominates, as soon as Blumenbach touches on the great question of the unity of men, he jokes no more; his language immediately alters, and takes naturally the tone of the truest sensibility. He never speaks of men, or of any men, but with affection. According indeed to his doctrine, all men are born, or might have been born, from the same man. He calls the negroes *our black brothers*. It is an admirable thing that science seems to add to Christian charity, or, at all events, to extend it, and invent what may be called *human charity*. The word Humanity has its whole effect in Blumenbach alone.

I have already said that Blumenbach, always wrapped up in his great works, had seldom quitted Germany. Still he made two journeys, one to England and one to France. In these two journeys he observed everything, but all as a naturalist. This man, who had passed so many years in meditating on the most important questions, on the highest problems of natural history, had at last only one idea, one object, one all-powerful pre-

occupation; a pre-occupation so strong as to be sometimes quite ludicrous, as we may judge from the two instances he used to relate himself.

Being entertained in London by all the English professors, they one evening took him to the theatre. The actor Kemble played the part of the Moor of Venice. Some days after, Kemble met Blumenbach at a party, and said, "M. Blumenbach, how did you think I succeeded in representing the character of a negro?" "Well enough, as far as the moral character goes," said our naturalist, and then added, "but all the illusion was destroyed for me the moment you opened your hand; for you had on black gloves, and the negroes have the inside of the hand of a flesh-colour." Every one laughed except Blumenbach; he had spoken quite in earnest.

After the peace of Tilsit, the town of Göttingen was included in the kingdom of Westphalia, and the University thought it necessary to solicit the protection of the great Emperor. Blumenbach was chosen as a deputy. "I found," said he, "all the French men of letters as eager to support me as if the question had been the preservation of a French institution; I owed to that generous zeal the success of my mission." Admitted, at last, to take leave in solemn audience, he attended in an antechamber with many of the foreign ambassadors. Napoleon appeared; all turned their attention to him except Blumenbach; for how could he? "I had," said he, "before me the ambassadors of Persia and Marocco, of two nations whom I had never yet seen."

To his passion for natural history Blumenbach joined a passion for all the great studies. Erudition, philosophy, letters had a share of his attention, but did not exhaust it. He was a good man of business. He had, in a high degree, that delicate and calm judgment which business demands. More than once, when charged with important missions, he brought them to an end with singular good fortune. In fact, the town of Göttingen decreed, in consideration of his services, that his property should be exempted from taxes. Göttingen indeed ought to have been grateful to him in every way. During sixty years

the celebrity of the man of learning and the professor was the cause of its prosperity. His name alone brought there a crowd of pupils; a population brilliant, moving, always being changed, always young and always learned. Nothing could equal the veneration all that population had for him. Almost all those of his pupils who became famous dedicated their works to him; and these dedications were not the mere homage of admiration. A touching and higher sentiment is found in them, and what indeed is better still, an affection almost filial. What more can I say? M. de Humboldt was a pupil of his¹, and the highest intellects of Germany, the Fichtes, the Kants, the Schellings have interpreted his ideas².

In private life Blumenbach was a thorough German, good-natured, frank, open and mild in manner. In him an honest character shone throughout. Essentially a man of good sense, after more than forty years spent in education, he wrote these words: "I never enter the amphitheatre without having particularly prepared each lesson, for I know that many professors have lost reputation by thinking that they know well enough a course they have delivered twenty times." He worked up to the end of his life. "I only know satiety by reputation," said he. It is said also that he preferred listening to speaking. He was prudent in everything. As La Fontaine says,

"The wise know how to manage time and words."

He had a maxim which displays his character: "One must know how to attract and retain by indulgence."

All happiness was his; a great reputation, a quiet life, a family tenderly beloved, illustrious pupils, a son worthy of his name. His long and beautiful old age was surrounded with the most touching homages. Every anniversary, which still preserved him to science, was celebrated as a festival. Seventy-eight learned societies elected him an associate. Medals were struck in his honour. Prizes were instituted in his

¹ In 1786 he had the honour to see the British Princes attend his lectures; and in 1803, the King of Bavaria; and in 1829, his son, the now Prince Royal.

² Particularly his idea of a *formative force*.

name; useful foundations still exist which perpetuate his memory by benefactions¹. This universal enthusiasm made no difference in him; he remained always good, simple, even familiar; everything in him was natural; no pretension, no affectation; nothing by which he tried to distinguish himself from others. "When one has a great deal of merit," says Fontenelle, "it is the crown of all to be like the rest of the world."

Blumenbach died on the 22nd Jan. 1840, being nearly a century old; a man of a high intellect, an almost universal scholar, philosopher and sage; a naturalist, who had the glory, or rather the good fortune, of making natural history the means of proclaiming the noblest and, without doubt, the highest truth that natural history ever had proclaimed, *The Physical Unity*, and through the *physical unity* the *moral unity*, of the human race.

¹ In 1830, the friends of Blumenbach, when they met to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his doctorate, conceived the idea of perpetuating the recollection of the day so memorable for science, by making up a purse of 5,000 dollars, about £800, of which the interest should be adjudged every three years by way of prize, to a young doctor, to be both physician and naturalist, who must have taken his degree in a German university, and be, says the deed, *young, poor, but fit*. Blumenbach himself gave out the prize twice, in 1833 and in 1836; after his death, it is to be adjudged alternately by the faculties of medicine at Göttingen and Berlin.

