

**MODERN SCIENCE AND
THE ILLUSIONS OF
PROFESSOR BERGSON**

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Modern Science and the Illusions of Professor Bergson by Hugh S. R. Elliot

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HUGH S. R. ELLIOT

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BY
HUGH S. R. ELLIOT

EDITOR OF 'THE LETTERS OF JOHN STUART MILL'

With a Preface by
SIR RAY LANKESTER, K.C.B., F.R.S.

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'Nam certe neque consilio primordia rerum
Ordine se suo quæque sagaci mente locarunt
Nec quos quæque (darent motus pepigere profecto,)
Sed quia multa modis multis mutata per omne
Ex infinito vexantur percita plagis,
Omne genus motus et coetus experiundo
Tandem deveniunt in talis disposituras,
Qualibus hæc rerum consistit summa creata,
Et multos etiam magnos servata per annos
Ut semel in motus conjectast convenientis,
Efficit ut largis avidum mare fluminis undis
Integrent amnes et solis terra vapore
Fota novet fetus summissaque gens animantium
Floreat et vivant labentes aetheris ignes.'

LUCRETIUS.

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PREFACE

BY SIR RAY LANKESTER, K.C.B., F.R.S.

I AM glad to write a few words by way of preface to Mr. Hugh Elliot's valuable little book, entitled *Modern Science and the Illusions of Professor Bergson*. I am glad to do this, not merely because I think that the books in which M. Bergson formulates those illusions are worthless and unprofitable matter, causing waste of time and confusion of thought to many of those who are induced to read them, but also because an unmerited importance has been attached to them by a section of the English public, misled by the ingenious and systematic advertisement of M. Bergson by those who amuse themselves with metaphysical curiosities. He has been introduced to us as a 'great French philosopher.' To those who in a thoroughgoing way occupy themselves in

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collecting and comparing and classifying all the absurdities which have been put forward as 'metaphysics' or 'metaphysical speculation' since the days of Aristotle, this latest effusion has, no doubt, a kind of interest such as a collector may take in a curious species of beetle. To the student of the aberrations and monstrosities of the mind of man, M. Bergson's works will always be documents of value. But it is an injustice as well as an inaccuracy to speak of their author as 'great,' or 'French,' or a 'philosopher.'

The word 'metaphysics,' which is commonly applied to such speculations as those which M. Bergson has published, has a strange history, and has often been used in a sense which cannot be justified. It took origin from the fact that the early disciples of Aristotle—not the philosopher himself—presented his treatises in the order (1) logic, (2) physics, and (3) a treatise concerning what he called Primary Philosophy, Theology and about Things as Things. As this third section was made to follow the treatises

PREFACE

on Physics or Natural History In its widest sense, it was called τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά, which became in Latin 'metaphysica.' The term was not employed (as has been sometimes believed) to mean 'supernatural things' but simply as indicating the position which, according to those who first used it, this third treatise should, as a matter of convenience, occupy. The questions which were discussed in this treatise and by Aristotle's earlier followers under the name 'metaphysics' are 'What is the nature of Being?' and 'What is the nature of Knowledge?' Any one who attempts to answer these questions, however absurd his answers may be, is entitled to be called, and is called, 'a metaphysician.' Equally entitled to be classed as 'metaphysics' are the reasoned statements of those who come to the conclusion that it is not within the power of man to give a real answer to the question, 'What is the world of things we know?' nor to the further question, 'How do we know that world?'

Modern science, taking it as it stands without

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inquiring into the gradual steps by which it was cleared of traditional superstitions, baseless assumptions, and ignorant fancies, has arrived at a systematic interpretation of the phenomena which we call 'Nature' as a vast and orderly mechanism, the working of which we can to a large extent perceive, foresee and manipulate so as to bring about certain results and avoid others. In consequence we not only enjoy that happiness and prosperity which arises from the occurrence of the expected, the non-occurrence of the unexpected and the determination by ourselves within ever-expanding limits of what shall occur—but we also experience a delight in the knowledge of the order of Nature which comes from the exercise of our intellectual faculty and from an increased area and complexity in the sources and measure of that joy which we call 'the sense of beauty.'

As to what, if anything, is outside or behind this mechanism of nature, as to whence or how it came about or whither it is going, as to what it and what our consciousness of it really