

**THE LIMITS OF
DEMONSTRATIVE SCIENCE
CONSIDERED IN A LETTER TO
THE REV. WILLIAM WHEWELL**

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The Limits of Demonstrative Science Considered in a Letter to the Rev. William Whewell by
Henry Longueville Mansel

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HENRY LONGUEVILLE MANSEL

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From the Author.

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CONSIDERED

IN A LETTER

TO THE

REV. WILLIAM WHEWELL, D.D.

MASTER OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE;
AUTHOR OF THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE INDUCTIVE SCIENCES.

BY THE

REV. HENRY LONGUEVILLE MANSEL, B.D.

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AUTHOR OF PROLEGOMENA LOGICA.

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St. John's College, Oxford,
April 12, 1853.

DEAR SIR,

10-10-48 ADE
I REGRET that I have been unable to pay earlier attention to the Letter which you did me the honour to address to me in September last. And even now, the remarks I am about to make on the subject of that Letter have been somewhat hastily drawn up, and must be considered rather as explanatory of previous statements than as embodying the results of subsequent study. But the subject is one in which I feel much interest; your own remarks have contributed considerably to simplify the question apparently at issue between us; and I am not without hopes that a few explanations on my part may help in some degree to settle a controversy which perhaps is more verbal than real.

Another motive I may be pardoned for confessing to have had some influence with me. "It is not often," observes a critic in the *Literary Gazette*, "that writers so distinguished as Dr. Whewell engage in controversy with those who criticise their published works." That the efforts of a tyro in philosophy should have attracted

this notice from one of its most eminent masters is in itself most gratifying, while the candid and courteous tone of your Letter calls for a grateful acknowledgment on my part, and encourages me to hope that the observations which I have now to offer will be received in the same kind and liberal spirit.

Let me begin with a few words on the subject with which your Letter commences, the reception of the philosophy of Kant in this country. The disparaging criticism of Stewart must be taken for what it is worth, coupled with the author's confession of his entire ignorance of the German language, and his consequent reliance on translations and second-hand authorities. To this may be added the judgment of the greatest philosophical critic of the age, "that the tone and tenor of Mr. Stewart's remarks on the philosopher of Koenigsberg are remarkable exceptions to the usual cautious, candid and dignified character of his criticism." The opinion of the "gentleman who has published a History of Moral Science," will hardly be deemed worthy of a serious notice.

It would probably astonish some of the critics who talk so comprehensively of German Metaphysics and German Theology, as if all Germans held the same opinions, to be told that the purport of the philosophy of Kant is to teach a lesson

* Sir W. Hamilton, *Reid's Works*, p. 886. n.

of humility, to inculcate the very limited nature of human faculties and human knowledge. And yet this is strictly true, however little of the same spirit may be discerned in the writings of Schelling or Hegel. Notwithstanding the historical connection between these earlier and later forms of German speculation, there is little real sympathy between the philosopher who announced as the moral of his critique, "Tecum habita, et noris, quam sit tibi curta supellex," and him who proclaimed his Logic as the "exhibition of God as he is in his eternal essence, before the creation of nature and of finite spirits." But Kant, great as has been his reputation, has not received his true honour in his own country. He is the philosophical offspring of Locke and Hume; his writings are the natural supplement and corrective of theirs; and it may be that the spirit of philosophy is not so extinct among the countrymen of Locke and Hume, but that the "unsightly root" of the German sage may yet bear in another soil the bright golden flower which it has failed to produce in its own¹.

¹ Since the above remarks were written, I have met with the following judgment of a very competent critic, Mr. Morell, in his recently published "Elements of Psychology," p. 241. "There is a very prevalent opinion in this country that the writings of Kant are obscure and mystical. This opinion, I am bold to say, is wholly due either to the entire want of philosophical culture in the minds of popular writers who undertake to sit in judgment upon him; or to a positive

That this hope is not entirely fallacious, your own writings furnish no small assurance. It is to the honour of the Author of the *History and Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* to have accomplished the most comprehensive and elaborate survey of the results of experience in a philosophical spirit the most remote from empiricism; to have acknowledged with Kant the existence of *a priori* conditions of consciousness in a work dedicated to the especial commemoration of the method of Bacon and the discoveries of Newton. It was mainly in consequence of my conviction of the very great services rendered by that work to Philosophy, that I ventured in the *Prolegomena Logica* to criticise a few passages, which, as understood by other readers as well as by myself, appeared to detract from the philosophical completeness of its theory. In the same

ignorance of the meaning of the terms he employs. No one, I believe, who has taken the most moderate pains to read the works of this greatest of modern critics *intelligently*, will hesitate to agree with me in affirming that a more clear, steady, penetrating, dispassionate, *unmystical* mind, is not to be found in the whole circle of modern literature. His style is *incomparably* more lucid than that of Locke; his use of terms far more defined, and his meaning grasped, on the whole, by a less stretch of thought. All he demands (which is surely not very unreasonable) is, that you shall learn the force of his terms at starting, and then keep to their proper meaning throughout." I am happy to be able to adduce the high authority of Mr. Morell in support of the opinion which I have long held of the philosophical merits of Kant.

spirit I wish now to exhibit, as briefly and plainly as I can, what appears to be the present state of the controversy, as modified by your subsequent explanations.

The theory which refers all knowledge to the single source of Experience, I have always considered to be, under any explanation to which it has been subjected, untenable. I have objected indeed to the vague expression, *origin of ideas*, which tends to confound under one formula two very different questions, one concerning the formation of *concepts*, the other concerning that of *judgments**. But as regards both concepts and judgments, and indeed the whole province of thought, pure and mixed, I have distinguished between the *matter*, which alone is given by experience, and the *form*, which is communicated by the mind itself[†]. In this sense, at least, I can heartily subscribe to the concluding words of your Letter. "And with regard to the image of vegetable developement, I may say, that as such developement implies both inherent forms in the living seed, and nutritive powers in earth and air; so the developement of our scientific ideas implies both a formative power, and materials acted on; and that, although the analogy must be very defective, we conceive that we best follow it by placing the formative power in the living mind, and in the external world the materials acted on: while the doctrine that all

* *Prolegomena Logica*, p. 187.

† *Ibid.* p. 228.