

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE
ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY,
NEW SERIES. - VOL. XXII**

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OF THE
ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY.

NEW SERIES.—VOL. XXII.

*Containing the Papers read before the Society during the
Forty-third Session, 1921-1922.*

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
I.—NOVELTY. THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS. By F. C. S. SCHILLER	1
II.—AN INDIAN DOCTRINE OF PERCEPTION AND ERROR. By F. W. THOMAS	23
III.—ON THE LIMITATIONS OF A KNOWLEDGE OF NATURE. By JAMES JOHNSTON	43
IV.—PHYSICAL SPACE AND HYPERSPACES. By F. TAVANL... ..	55
V.—PLATO'S THEORY OF EIKASIA. By H. J. PATON	69
VI.—STANDARDS AND PRINCIPLES IN ART. By A. H. HANNAY	105
VII.—DISCUSSION: THE IDEALISTIC INTERPRETATION OF EINSTEIN'S THEORY.	
I. By H. WILDON CARR	123
II. By T. P. NUNN... ..	127
III. By A. N. WHITEHEAD	130
IV. By DOROTHY WRINCH	134
VIII.—THE LOGIC OF THE VEDĀNTA. By S. N. DASGUPTA	139
IX.—SOME BYWAYS OF THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE. By R. F. ALFRED HOERNLÉ	157
X.—REALISM AND VALUES. By MARGARET MCFARLANE... ..	173
XI.—GEOMETRY AND REALITY. By THOMAS GREENWOOD... ..	189
XII.—BENEDETTO CROCE'S "HISTORIOGRAPHY." By DOUGLAS AINSLIE	205
XIII.—THE PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF RELATIVITY. By A. N. WHITEHEAD	215
XIV.—IN MEMORIAM: MISS E. E. CONSTANCE JONES	224
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ABSTRACT OF THE MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY FOR THE FORTY-THIRD SESSION	226
JOINT SESSION OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY, THE BRITISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY, AND THE MIND ASSOCIATION	229
THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE DE PHILOSOPHIE	231
FINANCIAL STATEMENT... ..	233
LIST OF OFFICERS AND MEMBERS FOR THE FORTY-FOURTH SESSION.	234



PAPERS READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY.

1921-1922.

*Meeting at 21, Gower Street, W.C. 1, on October 10th, 1921,
at 8 P.M.*

I.—NOVELTY.

THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS.

By F. C. S. SCHILLER.

SINCE you have chosen me to be your President for this Forty-third Session of our Society, and since this honour imposes on me the duty of delivering a Presidential Address, you may fairly be said to have asked for it. And I, of course, am not the man to let you off. You are going to have it all right, and I expect that, before I have done, most of you will have had your patience severely tried. But the fault is yours, not mine, if we have to-night to consider the most detested of subjects, which runs odiously counter to every instinct and every habit of every being, animate and inanimate. Even a desperado like myself would hardly have dared to intrude it upon a gathering of respectable philosophers, if he could not quote precedents and claim support; if, that is, the greatest of living metaphysicians had not so effectively pleaded for a revision of the old Eleatic verdict, to which nearly all philosophers have assented with such uncritical docility and unthinking enthusiasm, that no place need be made for Novelty in our philosophies, because Novelty is as such ultimately unthinkable and impossible. Perhaps M. Bergson's greatest achievement is to have shaken this prejudice, and to have made Novelty a good philosophic problem. It is no longer mere impertinence to inquire into Novelty, to ask philosophers to recognize its existence, to beg

them to analyse why they hate it and won't, and to insist that, whether they hate it or not, they have got to have it. If I do not suffer the fate of Pentheus, Galileo, or Bruno, before I have sufficiently elucidated these points, I may perhaps persuade one or two that since Novelty is ineluctable and we are all so constructed as to experience it, and the world is continually generating it, it may be more reasonable, or at least more sensible, to try to understand it than to try to ignore it.

For the benefit of these few, let me outline the scheme of this paper. My aim will be not so much to dazzle you with paradoxes, to ventilate novelties of detail, or to advocate new solutions for secular problems which have proved impervious to philosophic penetration for the past 3000 years, as to examine Novelty in principle, and to determine the conditions under which it may hope to obtain recognition in a rational conception of reality. I propose to show: I, that Novelty, really and naturally, exists, or rather occurs; II, that hatred of it exists, and is man's normal attitude; III, that this hatred is natural, and in a sense reasonable, but that IV, it should not goad us into denying Novelty. It is better to make the best of it, and of the consequences of recognizing it, in V, Logic, VI, Metaphysics, and VII, Religion.

I.

The short proof of the existence of Novelty consists of pointing to an obvious, all-pervasive psychical fact which is familiar to every one, and will, I suppose, be equally distasteful to the refined philosophers who feel it an insult to their intelligence to be asked to recognize the reality of a mere fact, and to the sturdy heretics who have found no use for mind in their philosophizing. The former will declare it unintelligible, incredible, and therefore impossible; the latter will decry it as "subjectivism." Still it is a simple psychical fact that our experience never quite repeats itself: in what we *call* "the same," and are tempted to regard as a recurrence of the same

experience, differences may always be detected, if we choose to attend to them. Even if there were no others, the mere fact that an experience had occurred before would make a difference. For the first time it came it was accompanied by a feeling of novelty; when it is repeated, this feeling is lost, and its place is taken by a growing sense of familiarity with infinite gradations of intensity. We know in advance what it will feel like and anticipate it with pleasure or repugnance, hope or apprehension, with interest, indifference, or tedium; thus the very fact that an experience is no longer "new" introduces a new factor. Even if we have more or less forgotten the first experience, it will "come back" to us the second time, and whether or not we remember it, there is reason to believe that the course of events will in all cases proceed differently in consequence of the past, and that so nothing is ever wholly forgotten and as though it had never been; indeed there would be no conceivable proof of such total oblivion except just this, that the course of events *did* repeat itself completely. And this does not appear to be the case. Instead it appears to be an ultimate fact that every mind which apprehends a fact has had a history, and this history makes a difference and affects its apprehension of the fact.

What is true of the mind holds moreover, no less, though less manifestly and indisputably, of the rest of reality. Its history too does *not* repeat itself absolutely, but only with a difference. The flow of reality sets in one direction only, and carries with it its whole past: everywhere the very fact that something has occurred before affects the way "it" happens the next time. This, ultimately, is the reason why the past is irrevocable and the course, even of physical change, is irreversible. It is the reason also why the future is never quite exactly calculable.

We may say then that all things are what they have become, and have become what they are, in virtue of what they have been through. Their history is thus always relevant to their "essence," and until we have ascertained it, we must not take

too seriously our definitions of the latter, and the inferences drawn from it. Aristotle made a gallant attempt to bring out this relevance of history to definition in his *τό τι ἦν εἶναι*, but his successors have too often failed to see that this clumsy phrase embodied a truth that was lacking to their "eternal" essences.

Now practical psychologists have, of course, long been aware of all this. They have known that, to forecast a man's action with any precision, it was vain to appeal to general principles, and necessary to know him, and his past, and if possible that of his ancestors. In these days the other sciences are being forced to similar admissions. The zoologist could never understand the nature and relations of living beings, until he took to working out their history: now he explains the present by the past, and solemnly tells us that we have five fingers because we have retained the primitive pentadactylism of the vertebrate stock! The astronomer nowadays is not content to speculate about a "primitive nebula" out of which our solar system was condensed; he extends and confirms his theory by conceiving it as a special (and very rare) case in the processes of "stellar evolution," and classifies the stars according to the stage in it which they have reached. The geologist is successfully connecting the character of his minerals with their history, and determining their age (and incidentally providing data for that of the earth) by the varying amounts of their "radio-activity." With the discovery of "isotopes" history has become relevant to chemistry, and chemists are growing chary of predicting how a given sample of a chemical element will behave and of declaring what it "is," until they have ascertained its history: for a given piece of "lead" may be "thorium-lead" or "uranium-lead," or, more probably, a mixture descended from both these "parents," and its "properties" will be affected by its ancestry. Ultimately, it seems likely, that all the "elements" will be found to be mixtures of isotopes.

In short, as we probe deeper, all the objects of scientific