

**THE PRESENT POSITION OF
THE PHILOSOPHICAL
SCIENCES; AN
INAUGURAL LECTURE**

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The present position of the philosophical sciences; an inaugural lecture by Andrew Seth

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ANDREW SETH

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AN INAUGURAL LECTURE

BY

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE title of this Lecture may seem to promise too much. The Lecture does not profess to deal with the circle of the philosophical sciences, but only with the subjects traditionally associated with a Chair of Logic and Metaphysics in Scotland. Moreover, as the occasion demanded, it is addressed not so much to the expert as to the large general public interested in philosophy.

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INAUGURAL LECTURE.

YOU will not find it wonderful if my feelings are deeply stirred in appearing before you to-day for the first time in my new capacity. There is no honour or privilege which I could possibly esteem higher than to teach philosophy in my own *alma mater*, and in the capital of my native land—to teach, moreover, in the Chair which, through the lustre of its occupants for half a century, is, in the mind of the country (I think I may say it without offence) in some respects the most famous of Scottish philosophical Chairs. All this is deeply gratifying. But it also lays a heavy responsibility upon him who succeeds to such great traditions. He who did not feel diffident at stepping into the place of these eminent men would be unworthy of the trust committed to him. I am deeply sensible of my

own deficiencies, but I hope, if it is granted me, to live and learn.

It is also a very gratifying experience to join as a colleague those who were the guides of one's youth. All are not here; but of the seven Professors of the Arts curriculum in my time only two have been removed by death. One, the genial and universally beloved Kelland, passed away in the ripeness of his years. The other leaves an untimely gap, which speaks of recent loss and a common sorrow. One whose welcome to-day would have sounded with peculiar pleasantness in my ears, the generous and high-souled Sellar, has gone from us too soon; and to those who knew him, his loss seems not less but greater as the days go by.

All the more is it matter of heartfelt satisfaction to me that no such painful gap exists in connection with my own Chair—that I succeed my honoured and beloved teacher while he is yet among us in full health and in the unimpaired vigour of his powers. Long may he live to counsel us wisely and inspire us by his example, and to embody in literary form the ripe results of a life's reflection. In these circumstances, and in his presence, it is not for me to pronounce any eulogy upon his thirty-five years

of strenuous and fruitful work in this university, or to attempt to sum up his happily unfinished achievement. But I will at least record a little of what I personally owe to him. He taught me to think; and in the things of the mind that is the greatest gift for which one man can be indebted to another. Seventeen years ago I entered the Junior Logic class of this university, with a mind opening perhaps to literature, but still substantially with a schoolboy's views of existence; and there, in the admirably stimulating lectures to which I listened, a new world seemed to open before me. What the student most needs at such a period is to be intellectually awakened. The crust of custom has to be broken, and the sense of wonder and mystery stirred within him. He should not be crammed with ready-made solutions of difficulties he has never been made to feel. Rather should he be sent "voyaging through strange seas of thought alone." He has to be induced to ask himself the world-old questions, and to ponder the possible answers. Above all, the listener should be made to feel that the questions of which the Professor speaks are not merely information which he communicates—that they are to him the most real things in the world, the recurring subjects of

his deepest meditation. All this his students found realised in Professor Fraser's teaching. His sympathetic exposition enabled us to catch the spirit of the most diverse standpoints, while his searching criticism prevented us from resting in any of those facile solutions which owe their simplicity to the convenient elimination of intractable elements. The sense of mystery and complexity in things, which he brought so vividly home to us, inspired a wise distrust of extreme positions and of systems all too perfect for our mortal vision. This union of dialectical subtlety with a never-failing reverence for all that makes man man, and elevates him above himself, lives in the memory of many a pupil as no unworthy realisation of the ideal spirit of philosophy. I shall count myself happy if, with his mantle, some portion of his spirit shall be found to have descended upon his successor. I hope that, in the days to come, the dingy but famous class-room will be distinguished as of old by searching intellectual criticism and impartial debate, not divorced from that spirit of reverence and humility which alone can lead us into truth.

That reminds me that you will expect to hear

from a new Professor some indication of the view he takes of his subject, and of the present outlook in connection with it. Anything that can be said on an occasion like the present must necessarily be of a very general character, but even so it may have a certain interest and usefulness.

The discipline of the Chair, then, seems to me to be of a threefold character—logical, psychological, and metaphysical or philosophical in the strict sense. That is to say, we study, in the first place, the nature of the reasoning process, or, to be more accurate, the nature of proof or evidence—the conditions to which valid reasoning must conform. In the second place, we study, introspectively and otherwise, the phenomena of consciousness. We bring observation and experiment to bear upon those internal facts which are for each of us the only facts immediately present to us, the facts through which we know all other facts. We try to analyse and lay bare the inmost nature of those functions of knowing, feeling, and willing which lie “closer to us than breathing, nearer than hands or feet,” which constitute, in fact, our very life, the expression of the self in time. In the third place, we study, under the title of philosophy proper, the twofold question of Knowing and Being. On the one hand, we investigate