

**PHILOSOPHY AND
LIFE; AND
OTHER ESSAYS**

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Philosophy and life; and other essays by J. H. Muirhead

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J. H. MUIRHEAD

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AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY

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ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος αἰ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπων.



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1902

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Of the first series of Essays in this volume, about one half have already appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* and other journals, and are republished with the kind permission of the Editors. They were all written in the first instance as lectures for various more or less popular societies.

The four more technical papers at the end were read some years ago before the Aristotelian Society in London, and are reprinted partly from *Mind* and partly from the *Proceedings* of that society. They had for their aim the closer connexion of Logical Science with the concrete problems of knowledge.

BIRMINGHAM, *March 25th*, 1902.

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ETHICAL.



PHILOSOPHY AND LIFE.

I.

PHILOSOPHY AND LIFE.¹

WHEN it was proposed to found a School of Ethics and Social Philosophy in London, the most common objection that the promoters had to meet was this—that a School of Philosophy had no definite relation to life. Ethical Societies, it was said, meet a practical demand. The School of Economics, the analogy of which suggested a School of Ethical Philosophy, also appealed to certain definite classes—to bank clerks, Government officials, and to the great business world generally; above all, it appeals to social and political reformers. But it did not seem so obvious that the subjects we proposed to deal with here had any similar *clientèle* to draw upon.

This objection seems to reflect the common view of the relation of philosophy to life. It is pretty generally admitted that life is a good thing for the philosopher. It broadens him, and soon convinces him that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy.” But people are not at all so clear that philosophy is a good thing for life. There are some, indeed, who go so far as to doubt whether

¹ Lecture delivered at the Passmore Edwards Settlement, London, in 1899.

philosophy has any connection with the serious questions of everyday life—indeed, whether it is a serious subject at all. They regard it as a kind of pastime, a kind of “blind man’s buff,” in which able and leisurely persons from the University sometimes indulge. This seems to have been the view that the late Charles Bowen took of it when he defined metaphysics as “groping about in a dark room for a black hat which was not there!”

There are others who take a more serious, if not a more favourable, view of the function of philosophy. They think that philosophy has a definite relation to life, but that this relation is rather of a negative than a positive character, inasmuch as from the time of Socrates downwards it has been on uncomfortable terms with some of our common opinions and conventions. It has got a reputation for saying nasty things about those useful and comfortable assurances on which our ordinary life is based. Indeed, the philosopher is openly suspected by some of entertaining designs upon our most cherished convictions, and people nervously grip their principles when he is by, as they grip their purses when pickpockets are about.

This seems to be the view which was held by the late Master of Balliol, if one may judge by some passages in his *Life and Letters*. Philosophy, he thought, was a very good thing, because of the tendency among philosophers to attack common-sense opinions and set up idols of their own in place of them. This could only be counteracted by a little more philosophy, which was therefore chiefly useful in dispelling the illusions which it had itself created. A little metaphysics, he thought, was useful in order to get rid of