HAMLET; A PSYCHOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

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Hamlet; a psychological point of view by W. Dyson Wood

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W. DYSON WOOD

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FROM

A PSYCHOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW.

BY

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1870.

HAMLET.

On the occasion of an attempt to treat a subject of importance in a philosophical manner, the time I think is not inappropriate for an examination of the rather complicated and difficult questions, What is philosophy? and What are its aims? For, to some extent, according to the view taken of the nature and aims of philosophy will depend the place assigned to it in what may be called the hierarchy of thought, influencing also our classification of the other branches of human inquiry. Without troubling yourself about the meaning more or less vaguely attached to the term philosophy by persons sufficiently busy, according to their own notions, in the business and bustle of every-day life, and not caring to bother their heads about matters interesting only as they think to bookworms and specialists—if

you were to pick out of a crowd of educated thinking men half-a-dozen at random and ask each one separately for his definition of philosophy and explanation of its aims, it is quite possible that you would receive as many different answers as there were answerers. One would limit the term philosophy to mental philosophy, probably thinking at the time of metaphysics; another might attach it exclusively to another branch of mental philosophy called psychology; another would make it out to be something very like logic, and so on. From this it may be gathered that, in speaking of philosophy, one is not referring to an ultimate entity which all men recognise and attach the same meaning to, but that in dealing with this question it is necessary in the first instance to confess that we are handling a topic of great complexity, about the very nature of which men of apparently equal ability are divided in opinion, and this fact, therefore, should deter us from speaking on the subject with anything like dogmatic certainty. The wholesome dread of being dogmatic should not, however, deter any individual from launching forth into courageous speculation not inconsistent with scientific precision, nor from the attempt to form his own opinion on the subject

by using freely and boldly the materials at his command.

The view which I myself have ventured to adopt of the nature of philosophy and its place in the realm of thought is one which I think places it in a far higher position than any accorded to it by the views mentioned above. When we look abroad into the world around us, nature at first sight presents an unintelligible chaos in which the mind is apt occasionally to become almost lost. What we have to do is to decompose this chaos into single facts, making a separation of the facts, not only in our own minds, but in nature. Every great advance which has marked an epoch in the progress of science has consisted in a further approach made to the answer of the question, What are the laws of nature? or, in other words, What are the fewest and simplest general propositions, which, being granted, the whole existing order of nature would result? It is by analysis and synthesis—the breaking up and the classifying of the materials presented to us in the field of nature—that the various sciences are built up and organised, and we gradually acquire the power of looking upon nature, not as a collection of materials lying in hopeless confusion, but as an orderly system in

which there is no such thing as Chance, and where Law reigns supreme.

By the laws of science, then, we are able to classify the materials coming under our observation, and are able to form conceptions of their relations to one another. Having before us the whole of the various sciences, and all other sources of knowledge, whatever they may be, we next see the want of some one grand chain to which all these branches of knowledge may be attached, and by which they may all be linked in one harmonious whole or series, each in its place, ranging from the most fundamental simplicity to the highest complexity. In fact, having possessed ourselves of the data, we want next a doctrine. To supply this want and constitute itself this doctrine is, as far as I can see, the aim of philosophy. Philosophy according to this view may be described as the systematization of the conceptions furnished to us by all sources of knowledge. In this way I would place philosophy on the very highest pinnacle in the domain of thought, inasmuch as it, and it alone, would, according to this view, deal with the highest generalizations.

In conducting any scientific or philosophical investigation, if the mind is to do its work rightly, it must proceed according to certain

definite methods, to teach us which is the aim of the science of logic in its most extended form. But logic itself—I am speaking more particularly of what is called inductive logic—is nothing more than the codification, so to speak, of the rules of investigation which have been found useful in the various sciences, and which have been carried to their greatest perfection in the physical sciences. In order to be a man of science—and by a man of science I don't mean simply one who goes about with a goodly number of bare facts more or less connected with science, but rather one who carries on his investigations,—in fact does all his work according to scientific methods, and is deeply imbued with a scientific spirit,—I say in order to be a man of science according to this view, it is not necessary, fortunately, to be acquainted with the details of every separate science, for the reason that the methods of investigation pursued in the various sciences are fundamentally the same; so much so that if you knew one or two sciences well—especially if they be sciences in a high state of perfection, as are the physical sciences more particularly in combination with mathematics—you have a key by which you may easily unlock all the other sciences. To teach us these

methods, which are in truth the theory of science, is the high province of logic—a subject in my humble opinion not yet at all adequately appreciated either in our schools or universities in England. I say England advisedly, for the Scotch universities have for a long time been doing much better work in the matter.

In viewing the order of the universe—the laws by which it is governed and the invariability of their action—an invariability, so far as the highest faculty with which we have been gifted, our reason, can inform us, never departed from—we come at last to the consideration of Man and the part he plays in the great scheme of creation. Man finds himself in a world which he himself has not made, that this world is under the dominion of certain laws, and, looking at himself outside the narrow boundary of his own conscious individuality, he gradually discovers that he himself, his actions and his thoughts, are as much under the government of unvarying laws as any other parts of nature, and that, whether he likes the process or not, he must learn those laws, bow down to them, and act through them. Endowed, however, with self-consciousness in a high degree, he lapses occasionally from this calm and philosophical view of his relations to the rest of crea-