

**LECTURE ON THE THEORY OF MORAL
OBLIGATION: BEING THE FIRST OF A
COURSE OF LECTURES DELIVERED
BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
IN LENT TERM MDCCCXXX**

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BY

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PHILOSOPHY.



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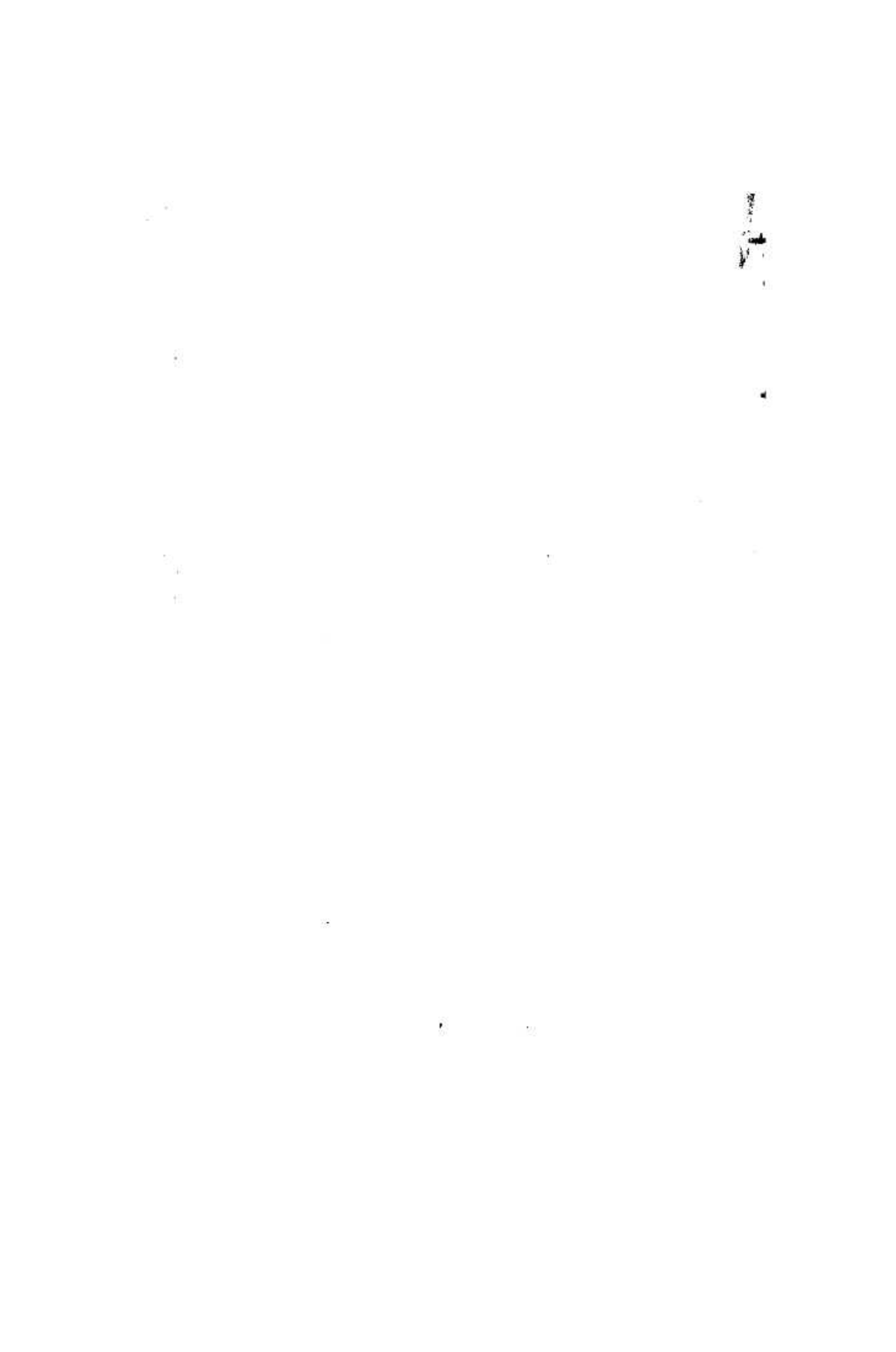
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TO
GEORGE WILLIAM HOPE, Esq.

THE FOLLOWING LECTURE

IS INSCRIBED

WITH THE SINCEREST FRIENDSHIP AND REGARD.



LECTURE

ON THE

THEORY OF MORAL OBLIGATION.

IF the study of moral philosophy were now established for the first time among the branches of knowledge cultivated in this University, it might be thought necessary to offer some observations at length in favour of a science the object of which is in general imperfectly understood, and the pursuit of which is considered by many of doubtful value, and by a few absolutely pernicious. But to enter upon such a defence before men educated in this place must be superfluous; their judgment will enable them to separate the legitimate use of knowledge from the abuse of it; and they have improved this discrimination itself by the study of that moral philosophy which superficial minds are apt to view with so much apprehension. The Profes-

sorship to which I have been appointed (and I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude for the honour) has indeed been revived after a long interval; but it only fell into disuse in the first instance, because private instruction in particular Colleges rendered public lectures upon the same subject of comparatively less importance. There is no University in Europe in which the ancient writers on ethics have been studied with more diligence and success: and though the maxim of lord Bacon, "*Antiquitas sæculi juvenus mundi,*" be true in its application to the physical sciences, which are continually advancing to perfection by the accumulated stores gathered in each succeeding age, the remark is not just when extended to the moral sciences; since the latter can derive no new principles from our more accurate investigation of the external world. In our study of the ancient writers indeed it is by no means necessary to disregard the modern; both should be investigated, to supply their mutual deficiencies, and to illustrate each other. It is only by comparing

the main principles of Aristotle, Plato, and Epicurus, and the systems that grew out of them, with the opinions of Des Cartes and his followers, with the doctrines of Hobbes, with those of Locke and his opponents, that we can expect to establish upon any solid basis the philosophy of the human mind. But if we are compelled to choose between them, and to decide which ought to have the preference as text-books in a system of education, those who are best acquainted with their respective merits will have no hesitation in assigning the first rank to the ancients. If the moderns have shewn more ingenuity in examining the faculties of man, in tracing the association of ideas, and explaining the phenomena of our mental constitution, the Grecian philosophers are beyond all comparison their superiors in comprehensiveness of design, in beauty of style, and closeness of reasoning: and it should not be forgotten, that some of the most recent modern systems, which set up high claims to originality, have been borrowed without acknowledgment from the writers of antiquity.

But there are some, perhaps, who will inquire, to what purpose is it that such a subject as *moral philosophy* is pursued at all? Are not Christians, they will ask, already possessed of an inspired code of duty, to which they are bound to yield implicit obedience? Now, if we take the lowest sense of the terms, and consider *moral philosophy* as synonymous with mere ethics, and employed only in furnishing a course of practical rules for the conduct of life, the objection which has just been stated rests upon no solid grounds. It is founded upon an incorrect and mistaken view of Christian morality, and argues at the same time an imperfect acquaintance with the proper sphere and just value of other ethical systems. The principles and precepts of the gospel, transcendentally perfect as they are, cannot supersede the necessity of judicious instruction, as to their correct application. Being general and comprehensive, they are adapted to all the varying scenes of human conduct; but the time and mode and circumstance of their adaptation is to be pointed out, otherwise their utility as prac-