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# THE PRINCIPLES OF UNDERSTANDING

AN INTRODUCTION TO LOGIC FROM THE  
STANDPOINT OF PERSONAL IDEALISM

BY

HENRY STURT, M.A.

PRIVATE TUTOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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## PREFACE

I HOPE it is not presumptuous to anticipate that philosophy in the present century will enter upon a new career of usefulness. I do not mean that in taking up new tasks it will quit the old. There are certain reasons why philosophy has been valuable to men since the epoch when it first arose in ancient Greece; these same reasons will make it valuable as long as human culture endures. But may we cherish the hope that a time is at hand when it will appeal to us with a new claim?

If any one were to ask, Has philosophy ever been of any practical use? the friend of philosophy could not meet the question without a certain hesitancy and a qualification; so much depends on what is meant by 'use.' Philosophy has been useful as poetry has been useful: it has brought home to man the mystery and romance of his existence; it has led his mind up from low thoughts and cares into a higher and purer atmosphere. Its greatest importance has been with religion; if religion is useful, then philosophy has been useful. Popular religion is very largely a substitute for philosophy; and even in minds where the two

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things are kept most distinct, they must interact in no small measure. They have interacted most where they have been pursued most keenly. What would medieval theology have been without Aristotle? And what would medieval philosophy have been without the medieval Church?

But the most convinced enthusiast could not claim that philosophy has given guidance to men engaged in the sort of business which is commonly called useful. I leave aside the general effect of training. It is plain enough that men who have traversed a philosophic curriculum gain advantage thereby for an ordinary professional career; but this is due more to the mental gymnastic than to any specific instruction which their teachers have imparted. What statesman makes any appeal to political philosophy; what moral reformer makes appeal to ethics; what educator who professes to train the understanding makes appeal to logic? So patent has it been that philosophy can give no practical advice that its incapacity has been put forward almost as an axiom. Minerva's owl, said Hegel, cannot begin its flight till the shades of evening have begun to fall. But, I think, that owl has hooted long enough. Hegel's alleged necessity of thought is nonsense. It is the duty of philosophy, I maintain, to establish theoretical principles on such matters as politics, moral conduct and education; and these principles should be valuable for the guidance of practical men.

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A philosophic synthesis to be really useful must be founded on principles which correspond with the true nature of reality. Of all speculative principles the two most important, I hold, are these—that personal experience should be the basis of our synthesis, and that personal experience is spiritual. These are the principles of Personal Idealism. There are sufficient reasons why they have never been adequately recognized hitherto. Full recognition of the principle of personality was impossible before the rise of modern psychology. Psychology consists in exploration of the psyche: and this, though it may seem simple (a man has only got to look within his own breast), is really a most difficult business; it requires a long succession of careful observers and a great accumulation of results. Only in recent years has psychological theory been in any way adequate to psychological facts. And so many of those who have striven hardest to explore the psyche have neglected the cardinal condition of success, the recognition of the spirituality of personal experience.

It will be argued in the following pages that logic should be the theoretical account of the actual processes of human understanding. If logic could fulfil this programme it would serve as the basis of education. The business of the educator is to train the understanding, and therefore a true theory of understanding should be as helpful to him as a true physiology is to one who professes to train the body.



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The time seems scarcely to have come for attempting a complete theory of understanding; so many preliminary questions call for discussion. These cannot be put aside or taken for granted; and yet to include them in a 'System of Logic' would swell the work beyond reasonable length. But even these preliminaries have a direct bearing upon utility. This, at any rate, is how I should like my work to be judged: Does it throw any light upon the way in which our minds actually work? Does it contain suggestions useful for those who think much and are training others to think? If not, I am prepared to admit that it is a failure.

There are various kinds of human utility; good systems of ideas in religion, education, morals, law and politics are not less truly useful than food, houses and clothing. As many men have lived and died for the higher utilities as for the lower. I think that in the future every philosophical work, which is not manifestly a poem, will have to justify itself on the ground of utility; and that every thinker will have to write in the spirit of those who desire, in Bacon's phrase, "to contribute to the relief of man's estate."

H. S.

*December, 1914.*

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