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In a Course of Lectures

Friedrich Von Schlegel

Excerpt

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PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE.

LECTURE I.

OF THE THINKING SOUL AS THE CENTRE OF CONSCIOUSNESS, AND OF THE FALSE PROCEDURE OF REASON.

“THERE are,” says a poet as ingenious as profound,* “more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.” This sentiment, which Genius accidentally let drop, is in the main applicable also to the philosophy of our own day; and, with a slight modification, I shall be ready to adopt it as my own. The only change that is requisite to make it available for my purpose would be the addition—“and also between heaven and earth are there many things which are not dreamt of in our philosophy.” And exactly because philosophy, for the most part, does nothing but dream—scientifically dream, it may be—therefore is it ignorant, ay, has no inkling even of much which, nevertheless, in all propriety it ought to know. It loses sight of its true object, it quits the firm ground where, standing secure, it might pursue its own avocations without let or hindrance, whenever, abandoning its own proper region, it either soars up to heaven to weave there its fine-spun webs of dialectics, and to build its metaphysical castles in the air, or else, losing itself on the earth, it violently interferes with external reality, and determines to shape the world according to its own fancy, and to reform it at will. Half-way between these two devious courses lies the true road; and the proper region

* Shakspeare. Hamlet, Act I. Scene V.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Schlegel seems to have read *our*, which is the reading of the folio of 1263.—*Trans.*

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2 PLATO—COSMOGONIES OF THE IONIAN SCHOOL.

of philosophy is even that spiritual inner life between heaven and earth.

On both sides, many and manifold errors were committed, even in the earlier and better days of enlightened antiquity. Plato himself, the greatest of the great thinkers of Greece, set up in his Republic the model of an ideal polity, which, in this respect, cannot bear the test of examination. His design indeed finds, in some measure, its apology in the disorders and corruption which, even in his day, had infected all the free states of Greece, whether great or small. His work too, by the highly finished style of the whole, the vivid perspicuity of its narrative, its rich profusion of pregnant ideas and noble sentiments, stands out in dignified contrast to the crude and ill-digested schemes of legislation so hastily propounded in our own day. Still, it will ever remain the weak point of this great man. One needs not to be a Plato to see how absolutely unfeasible, not to say practically absurd, are many of the propositions of this Platonic ideal. Accordingly it has ever been the fruitful occasion, not only among contemporaries, but also with posterity, of ridicule to the ignorant and of censure to the wise. In this respect it cannot but excite our regret that such great and noble powers of mind should have been wasted in following a false direction, and in pursuit of an unattainable end. The oldest philosophers of Greece, on the other hand—those first bold adventurers on the wide ocean of thought, combined together the elements of things, water, or air, or fire, or atoms, or lastly the all-ruling Intellect* itself, into as many different systems of the universe. If, however, each in his own way thus set forth a peculiar creed of nature, we must ever bear in mind that the popular religion, with its poetical imagery, and the fabulous mythology of antiquity, as affording not only no sufficient, but absolutely no answer to the inquiring mind, as to the essence of things, and the first cause of all, could not possibly satisfy these earlier thinkers. Consequently they might well feel tempted to find, each for himself, a way to honour nature, and to contemplate the supreme Being. Since then, however, the world has grown older by nearly twenty-

* The *νοῦς* of Anaxagoras. A brief, but characteristic sketch of these earlier philosophemes is given in Thirlwall's History of Greece, vol. ii. See also Ritter's History of Philosophy, vol. i.—*Trans.*

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OBJECTS AND LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY.

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five centuries, and much in the meanwhile has been accomplished by, or fallen to the share of, the human race. But when philosophy would pretend to regard this long succession of ages, and all its fruits, as suddenly erased from the records of existence, and for the sake of change would start afresh, so perilous an experiment can scarcely lead to any good result, but in all probability, and to judge from past experience, will only give rise to numberless and interminable disputes. Such an open space in thought—cleared from all the traces of an earlier existence (a smoothly polished marble tablet, as it were, like the *tabula rasa* of a recent ephemeral philosophy)—would only serve as an arena for the useless though daring ventures of unprofitable speculation, and could never form a safe basis for solid thought, or for any permanent manifestation of intellectual life.

In itself it is nothing surprising if young and inexperienced minds, occupying themselves prematurely, or in a perverted sense, with the grand ideas of God and Nature, liberty and the march of thought, should be wholly overmastered and carried away with them. It has often happened before now, and it is no new thing if youthful and ardent temperaments should either yield to the seductive temptation to make, not to say create, a new religion of their own; or else feel a deceitful impulse to censure and to change all that is already in existence, and, if possible, to reform the whole world by their newly acquired ideas.

That this twofold aberration and misuse of philosophical thought must prove universally injurious, and prejudicial both to education and the whole world, is so evident that it can scarcely be necessary to dwell upon it. Its effect has been to cause men, especially those whose minds have been formed in the great and comprehensive duties of practical life, to view the thing altogether in an evil light, although it must be confessed there is much injustice in this sweeping condemnation. In several of the great statesmen of Rome we may observe a similar contempt for Grecian philosophy as useless and unprofitable. And yet, as is happily indicated by its Greek name, this whole effort was assuredly based upon a noble conception, and, when duly regulated, a salutary principle. For in this beautiful word, according to its original acceptance, science is not regarded as already finished

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FORM AND METHOD OF TRUE PHILOSOPHY.

and mature, but is rather set forth as an object of search—of a noble curiosity and of a pure enthusiasm for great and sublime truths, while at the same time it implies the wise use of such knowledge. Merely, however, to check and to hinder the aberrations of a false philosophy, is not by itself sufficient. It is only by laying down and levelling the right road of a philosophy of life, that a thorough remedy for the evil is to be found. True philosophy, therefore, honouring that which has been given from above and that which is existent from without, must neither raise itself in hostility to the one, nor attempt to interfere violently with the other. For it is exactly when, keeping modestly within its proper limits of the inner spiritual life, it makes itself the handmaid neither of theology nor of politics, that it best asserts its true dignity and maintains its independence on its own peculiar domain. And thus, even while it abstains most scrupulously from intermeddling with the positive and actual, will it operate most powerfully on alien and remote branches of inquiry, and by teaching them to consider objects in a freer and more general light, indirectly it will exercise on them a salutary influence. Thus while it proceeds along its appointed path, it will, as it were, without effort disperse many a mist which spreads its dangerous delusion over the whole of human existence, or remove perhaps many a stone of stumbling, which offends the age and divides the minds of men in strife and discord. In this manner consequently will it most beautifully attest its healing virtue, and at the same time best fulfil its proper destination.

The object therefore of philosophy is the inner mental life (*geistige Leben*), not merely this or that individual faculty in any partial direction, but man's spiritual life with all its rich and manifold energies. With respect to form and method: the philosophy of life sets out from a single assumption—that of life, or in other words, of a consciousness to a certain degree awakened and manifoldly developed by experience—since it has for its object, and purposes to make known the entire consciousness and not merely a single phase of it. Now, such an end would be hindered rather than promoted by a highly elaborate or minutely exhaustive form and a painfully artificial method; and it is herein that the difference lies between a philosophy of life and the philo-

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PHILOSOPHY OF THE SCHOOLS UNINTELLIGIBLE. 5

sophy of the school. If philosophy be regarded merely as one part of a general scientific education, then is the instruction in method (whether under the old traditional name of Logic or any other) the chief point to be regarded. For such a mere elementary course, passing over, or at least postponing for a while the consideration of the matter, as possessing as yet but a very remote interest for the student, and, in the default of an adequate internal experience of his own, incapable of being understood by him, concerns itself rather with the practice of methodical thought, both as necessary for the future, and as applicable to all matters. But the preliminary exercise in philosophical thinking is only the introduction to philosophy, and not philosophy itself. This school-teaching of philosophy might perhaps be rendered productive of the most excellent consequences, if only it were directed to the history of the human intellect. What could be more interesting than a history which should enter into the spirit, and distinctly embody the various systems which the inventive subtlety of the Greeks gave birth to, or which, taking a still wider range, should embrace the science of the Egyptians, and some Asiatic nations, and illustrate the no less wonderful nor less manifold systems of the Hindoos—those Greeks of the primeval world! But this, perhaps, would be to encroach upon the peculiar domain of erudition, and might, moreover, fail to furnish equal interest for all; and at any rate the history of philosophy is not philosophy itself.

Now, the distinction between the philosophy of life and the philosophy of the school will appear in very different lights according to the peculiarity of view which predominates in the several philosophical systems. That species of philosophy which revolves in the dialectical orbit of abstract ideas, according to its peculiar character presupposes and requires a well-practised talent of abstraction, perpetually ascending through higher grades to the very highest, and even then boldly venturing a step beyond. In short, as may be easily shown in the instance of modern German science, the being unintelligible is set up as a kind of essential characteristic of a true and truly scientific philosophy. I, for my part, must confess, that I feel a great distrust of that philosophy which dwells in inaccessible light, where the inventor indeed asserts of himself, that he finds himself in an unattain-

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able certainty and clearness of insight, giving us all the while to understand thereby, that he does see well enough how of all other mortals scarcely any, or perhaps, strictly speaking, no one, understands or is capable of understanding him. In all such cases it is only the false light of some internal *ignis fatuus* that produces this illusion of the unintelligible, or rather of nonsense. In this pursuit of wholly abstract and unintelligible thought, the philosophy of the school is naturally enough esteemed above every other, and regarded as pre-eminently the true science—*i. e.*, the unintelligible.

In such a system a philosophy of life means nothing more than a kind of translation of its abstruser mysteries into a more popular form, and an adaptation of them to the capacity of ordinary minds. But even such popular adaptations, though evincing no common powers of language and illustration, in spite of their apparent clearness, when closer examined, are found as unintelligible as the recondite originals. For inasmuch as the subject-matter of these abstract speculations was, from the very first, confused and unintelligible, it was consequently incapable of being made clear even by the most perspicuous of styles. But the true living philosophy has no relation or sympathy with this continuous advance up to the unintelligible heights of empty abstraction. Since the objects it treats of are none other than those which every man of a cultivated mind and in any degree accustomed to observe his own consciousness, both has and recognizes within himself, there is nothing to prevent its exposition being throughout clear, easy, and forcible. Here the relation is reversed. In such a system the philosophy of life is the chief and paramount object of interest; while the philosophy of the school, or the scientific teaching of it in the schools, however necessary and valuable in its place, is still, as compared with the whole thing itself, only secondary and subordinate. In the philosophy of life, moreover, the method adopted must also be a living one. Consequently it is not, by any means, a thing to be neglected. But still it need not to be applied with equal rigour throughout, or to appear prominently in every part, but on all occasions must be governed in these respects by what the particular end in view may demand.

A few illustrations, drawn from daily experience, will per-

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RIGHT USE OF PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD.

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haps serve to explain my meaning. Generally speaking, the most important arts and pursuits of life are ultimately based on mathematics. This science furnishes them, as it were, with the method they observe; but it is not practicable, nor indeed has man the leisure, to revert on every occasion, with methodical exactness, to these elements, but, assuming the principles to be well known and admitted, he attends rather to the results essential to the end he has in view. The economical management of the smallest as well as of the largest household, rests in the end on the elementary principles of arithmetic; but what would come of it if, on every occasion, we were to go back to the simple "one-times-one" of the multiplication table, and reflected upon and sought for the proofs that the principle is really valid and can confidently be relied on in practice? In the same way the art of war is founded on geometry, but when the general arranges his troops for battle does he consult his Euclid to satisfy himself of the correctness and advantages of his position? Lastly, even the astronomer, whose vocation is pre-eminently dependent on accurate calculation, when he would make us acquainted with the phenomena of the sidereal heavens, confines himself almost entirely to them, without wearying those whom he wishes to interest, with the complicated reckonings which, however, in all probability, he was obliged himself to go through. With all these arts and pursuits of practical life, the intellectual business of thinking—of such thinking at least as is common to most men—and of communicating thought, has a sort of affinity and resemblance. For, unquestionably, it is one among the many problems of philosophy to establish a wise economy and prudent stewardship of that ever-shifting mass of incoming and outgoing thoughts which make up our intellectual estate and property. And this is the more necessary, the greater are the treasures of thought possessed by our age. For, in the highly rapid interchange of, and traffic in ideas, which is carrying on, the receipts and disbursements are not always duly balanced. There is much cause, therefore, to fear lest a thoughtless and lavish dissipation of the noblest mental endowments should become prevalent, or a false and baseless credit-system in thought spring up amidst an absolute deficiency of a solid and permanent capital safely invested in fundamental ideas and lasting truths. As for

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the second simile: I should, by all means, wish to gain a victory, not indeed for you, but with you, over some of the many errors and many semblances of thought, which are, however, but cheats and counterfeits which distract the minds of the present generation, disturb the harmony of life, and banish peace even from the intellectual world. And as respects the third illustration: I should indeed rejoice as having, in a great measure, attained my object, if only I shall succeed in directing your attention to some star in the higher region of intellect, which hitherto was either totally unknown, or, at least, never before fully observed.

But above all, I think it necessary to observe further, that in the same way as philosophy loses sight of its true object and appropriate matter, when either it passes into and merges in theology, or meddles with external politics, so also does it mar its proper form when it attempts to mimic the rigorous method of mathematics. In the middle of the last century scarcely was there to be found a German manual for any of the sciences that did not ape the mathematical style, and where every single position in the long array of interminable paragraphs did not conclude with the solemn act of demonstrative phraseology. But it is also well known that the philosophy which was propounded in this inappropriate form and method was crammed full of, nay, rather, was hardly anything more than a tissue of arbitrary, now forgotten, hypotheses, which have not brought the world at all nearer to the truth,—not at least to that truth which philosophy is in search of, and which is something higher than a mere example of accurate computation.

And even in the present day—although, indeed, the application is made in a very different way from formerly—German philosophy is anything but free from those algebraic formularies, in which all things, even the most opposite, admit of being comprised and blended together. But, be it as it may, this elaborate structure of mechanical demonstration can never produce a true, intrinsic, and full conviction. The method which philosophy really requires is quite different, being absolutely internal and intellectual (*geistige*). As in a correct architectural structure it is necessary that all its parts should be in unison, and such as the eye can take in easily and agreeably; so in every philosophical communica-

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UNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT.

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tion, the solid simple basis being laid, the arrangement of all the parts and the careful rejection and exclusion of all foreign matter, is the most essential point, both for internal correctness and external perspicuity. But, in truth, the matter in hand bears a far closer resemblance and affinity to natural objects which live and grow, than to any lifeless edifice of stone; to a great tree, for instance, nobly and beautifully spreading out on all sides in its many arms and branches. As such a tree strikes the hasty and passing glance, it forms a somewhat irregular and not strictly finished whole; there it stands, just as the stem has shot up from the root, and has divided itself into a certain number of branches and twigs and leaves, which livingly move backwards and forwards in the free air. But examine it more closely, and how perfect appears its whole structure! how wonderful the symmetry, how minutely regular the organization of all its parts, even of each little leaf and delicate fibre! In the same way will the ever-growing tree of human consciousness and life appear in philosophy, whenever it is not torn from its roots and stripped of its leaves by a pretended wisdom, but is vividly apprehended by a true science, and exhibited and presented to the mind in its life and its growth.

Not only, however, the arrangement of the whole, but also the connexion of the several parts of a philosophical treatise or development, is of a higher kind than any mere mechanical joining, such, for instance, as that by which two pieces of wood are nailed or glued together. If I must illustrate this connexion by a simile from animated nature, the facts of magnetism will best serve my purpose. Once magnetically excited, the iron needle comes into invisible contact and connexion with the whole globe and its opposite poles; and this magnetic clue has guided the bold circumnavigator into new and unknown regions of the world. Now, the intrinsic vital coherence of the several thoughts of philosophy resembles this magnetic attraction; and no such rude, mechanical, and in fact mere external conjunction of thought, like that lately alluded to, can satisfy the requirements of philosophical connexion.

But the supreme intrinsic unity of philosophical thought, or of a philosophical series of ideas, is quite different from every thing hitherto mentioned. It belongs not to nature, but to

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life; it is not derived from the latter by way of figure or illustration, but is a part and constituent of it, and goes to the very root and soil of the moral life. What I mean is, the unity of sentiment—the fixed character, remaining ever the same and true to itself—the inner necessary sequence of the thoughts—which, in life no less than in the system and philosophical theory, invariably makes a great and profound impression on our minds, and commands our respect, even when it does not carry along with it our convictions. This, however, is dependent on no form, and no mere method can attain to it. How often, for instance, in some famous political harangue, which perhaps the speaker, like the rhapsodist of old, poured forth on the spur of the moment, do we at once recognize and admire this character in the thoughts, this consistency of sentiment? How often, on the contrary, in another composed with the most exquisite research and strict method, and apparently a far more elaborate and finished creation of the intellect, we have only to pierce through the systematic exterior to find that it is nothing but an ill-connected and chance-medley of conflicting assumptions and opinions taken from all quarters, and the crude views of the author himself, devoid of all solidity, and resting on no firm basis, without character, and wholly destitute of true intrinsic unity?

If now, in the present course of Lectures, I shall succeed in laying before you my subject in that clearness and distinctness which are necessary to enable you to comprehend the whole, and while taking a survey of it, to judge of the agreement of the several parts, you will find, I trust, no difficulty in discovering the fundamental idea and sentiment. And further, I would venture to entreat you not to judge hastily of this sentiment from single expressions, and least of all at the very outset, but, waiting for its progressive development, to judge of it on the whole. Lastly, I would also indulge a hope, that the views of an individual thinker, if perspicuously enunciated, may, even where they fail of conviction, and though points of difference still subsist, produce no revolting impression on your minds; but, by exercising a healing influence on many a rankling wound in thought and life, produce amongst us some of the fairest fruits of true philosophy.

Hitherto we have been considering, first of all, the object and proper sphere of the philosophy of life; and secondly, its