

# INSTITUTE NOTES

## ANNUAL MEETING

THE Seventh Ordinary General Meeting of the Institute was held at University College, Gower Street, London, W.C.1, on Wednesday, May 25th, at 8.30 p.m. A large audience was present.

A resolution for the adoption of the Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for the year ended March 31, 1932, proposed by the Chairman was carried unanimously.

The Rt. Hon. Sir Herbert Samuel then delivered his Presidential Address, which was lively, topical, and penetrating. It was highly appreciated by his audience. The address in the form of a small book has been published by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., Ltd., price 1s. 6d.

Colonel John Buchan occupied the chair, and after the address of the President made the following contribution:—

"I am told that I have to make some observations, and my first is that we have had a delightful evening. Our President has given us an address which was both acute, sagacious, and provocative, and he has salted it with an admirable humour. We shall not soon forget his likening of a certain type of philosopher to the plumber who gets nothing done because he is always going back for his tools and his mate.

Sir Herbert Samuel, I fancy, like myself, began his philosophical studies under the shadow of the great classical systems. I think that in his day the Hegelianism of T. A. Green and Edward Caird was in its meridian. In my own day it had begun to decline a little, and we were more attracted by the subtlety and daring of Mr. F. H. Bradley and the close texture of Mr. Bosanquet. English Hegelianism had degenerated a little into formulas, and indeed it had become almost a devotional exercise. It had forgotten Plato's advice *φιλοσοφειν ἀνευ μαλακίας*, "to be a philosopher without slushiness." There was a legend in my day that someone, I think Professor Wallace, opened a Greats philosophy paper with "Write down what you know about God, and don't mention Him in the rest of the paper." There was a dangerous charm about those facile Hegelian reconciliations. That higher unity to which we so readily had recourse—it is a habit not easy to shake off. Is the present exalted position of our President not perhaps an example of the Hegelian "agreement in difference"?

I have often heard Lord Balfour say that the sense of atmosphere was one of the most valuable endowments of a philosopher. A thinker must have an instinct for the topical, if he is to have any real influence as a teacher, and understand just the right point of impact for philosophy upon the mind of his generation. Our President has in a high degree this sense of atmosphere. The secular philosophical problems must be stated in contemporary language, and in their restatement they will take on a new character. That is the eternal cycle. Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Lotze—their systems have not perished, but they are perpetually acquiring a new form. It was a famous saying of Hegel's that "the shore of the Happy Islands were strewn with the wrecks of philosophical systems." I have never thought that a very happy metaphor. The true metaphor should be rather, I think, that of some great organic growth like trees, which die down in time, but thereby enrich the soil and produce new growths of the same genus and species.

Sir Herbert Samuel, if I understand him rightly, thinks the temper of our age a little alien from the high-priori systems, and urges a more modest

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approach to philosophy, largely from the direction of the sciences. That is to say, he would have us be more careful to grasp the manifold of experience before we generalize about it. But modesty can be carried too far, and it must stop short, I think, of decrying the human reason. I was very glad to hear his strictures on what seem to me the false deductions drawn from certain admitted gaps in scientific proof, especially in physics. I am a little alarmed by a kind of "defeatism" which appears in certain popular expositions. Because we have to admit the existence of elements in the universe at present unknown, is it fair to argue that these elements are exempt from causal law? Ought we to regard "unpredictable" and "unintelligible" as equivalent to "uncaused" and "undetermined"? When we are told that these gaps in our knowledge mean the admission of free will into the universe I really cannot quite follow. I am a believer in free will, but I should not like to base it on these grounds. Sir Herbert had quoted a most interesting letter from Professor Einstein on the subject, and I have heard Professor Einstein say the same thing in conversation. I welcome Sir Herbert's defence of causality. If we politicians ever became sceptical about that I do not know where our souls would find rest.

The attitude of the ordinary man to-day, whom Sir Herbert so sympathetically interprets, is inclined to opportunism, but it is a fruitful opportunism. We have heard lately in connection with certain questions the phrase "loyal unrest." In the same way we may defend the current attitude as a kind of faithful and believing suspension of judgment. It may leave many provinces of life imperfectly rationalized, but it does not exclude reason from them; it does not legislate them out of existence under a narrow logical code.

We are not living to-day in an age of philosophic pride. Lord Acton once said that the modern historian must take his meals in the kitchen, and that would seem to be the attitude of the modern philosopher. He is almost painfully anxious to link his theories to the homely facts of life. The epoch of the great system-makers is over for the moment. No one has the courage to attempt an encyclopædic philosophy. Some may set this down to an advance in common sense; but since the impulse to systematize is so strong and enduring in human nature, I think something is also due to a failure of nerve.

We live in an age of sceptical disillusionment in most domains of human activity, an age of dilapidation and disintegration; dilapidation, which is the breakdown of shape and line; disintegration, which means the dissolving of things into a nebula of atoms. Our tendency has been to reduce life to what St. Paul called the "beggarly elements." But of course we cannot be content with these "beggarly elements," for we cannot abide in chaos. In every domain of life we are coming to see that some construction is necessary. The wounds which philosophy makes, only philosophy can cure. We must devise a working faith to suit our needs, and labour to attain such truth as is permitted to us. If our conclusions do not satisfy our children then our children will revise them according to their requirements. That is the eternal law of life. We move always towards a goal which we see before us as an ultimate thing, but which to our successors may be only a ridge behind which there are higher summits. That attitude, which is what our President has expounded to us to-night, is the attitude of a wise and practical humanism. It is something which the ordinary man can understand and value, for it is both humble and hopeful."

The Provost of University College, in his usual felicitous manner, proposed the vote of thanks to the President, which was carried with enthusiasm.

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# PHILOSOPHY

The syllabus for next session which is now being prepared will be sent to all members in due course.

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The Editor begs leave to remind all interested in the work of the Institute that donations of any amount, to supplement the inadequate income from subscriptions, will be greatly appreciated by the Council of the Institute.

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