THE IDEA OF GOD

IN THE LIGHT OF

RECENT PHILOSOPHY

The Gifford Lectures

DELIVERED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
IN THE YEARS 1912 AND 1913

BY

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TO

MY WIFE

AND THE DEAR MEMORY OF

RONALD

OUR YOUNGEST SON

WHO GAVE HIS LIFE WILLINGLY

AT GINCHY ON THE SOMME

6TH SEPTEMBER 1916

PREFACE

DISTRACTIONS and anxieties arising out of the war have interfered with the preparation of these Lectures for the press, but it is possible that, at certain points, the thought may have gained in maturity by the enforced delay.

Readers of this volume who listened to the Gifford Lectures in 1912 and 1913 will recognize that, in the main, the material and the treatment are the same. But I have not hesitated, on occasion, to transfer a lecture or part of a lecture from its original place in the series, when the sequence of thought seemed to gain thereby in clearness and logical coherence. One or two passages also, which appeared to have little or no bearing on the argument as it ultimately took shape, have been removed. A lecture, introductory to the Second Series, criticizing two recent essays on Religion, has been omitted. It served at the time as a convenient illustration of the thesis of the previous year's course, and it was printed shortly thereafter as an article in the *Hibbert Journal* for October 1913. But the discussion has not sufficient permanent importance to justify its retention here, and its inclusion would interrupt the course of what is intended to be a continuous argument. On the other hand, I have tried to develop the subject more fully at points where the original treatment had been somewhat hurried. This applies more particularly to the lecture on 'Time and

Eternity' and to the criticism of M. Bergson's doctrine of Time and its implications in the lecture which follows. Here what was originally a single lecture has grown into two. Complete success in such a region is unattainable, but I trust that what is now offered is, in some respects, a more adequate handling of a peculiarly difficult subject. In Lecture IV, while my view of the relation of biology to physics remains unchanged, I have added some detailed criticism of recent neo-vitalist statements from which I wish to dissociate myself; and the discussion of Pluralism in the later lectures has been extended by including a criticism of the views of Professor Howison, Dr. Rashdall, and Dr. McTaggart.

The choice of a title has caused me some difficulty. The title eventually chosen may easily be condemned as too ambitious; but it has at least the merit of comprehensiveness, and it is also the official subject of the Lectures founded by Lord Gifford. It has the disadvantage—if it be a disadvantage—that it does not indicate in advance the nature of the conclusion reached. But philosophical labels are for the most part misleading, and the conclusion will mean more to the reader if he discovers it for himself. I am especially anxious, however, that the reference to 'recent philosophy' should not lead anyone to suppose that the book is merely, or even primarily, an historical survey of opinion on the subject with which it deals. There are many names mentioned in the course of the lectures, and many theories criticized, but there is no pretence of an exhaustive survey, and not one of the names and theories actually cited is introduced on historical grounds. They are all employed as a means of illuminating, either by affinity or by force of contrast, the constructive position which is gradually built up in the course of the lectures. In short, although it consists largely of criticism, the interest of the book is neither critical

nor historical, but constructive throughout. This method of construction through criticism is the one which I have instinctively followed in everything I have written. I do not claim that it is the best method; I simply desire that its nature be recognized.

In the present case, when contemporary discussion on the fundamental questions of philosophy and religion is peculiarly active, the necessity is almost imposed upon a writer of defining his own position by reference to divergent views and other forms of statement. And I venture to think that the value of his work is thereby increased; for only by such mutual criticism, and the resulting definition of the points of difference, can we advance towards a common understanding. Readers of this volume will note the prominence given to Professor Bosanquet's impressive statement of the Idealistic position in the two volumes of his Gifford Lectures in the University of Edinburgh. I found it especially instructive, from time to time, to make Professor Bosanquet's treatment my point of departure, because, along with the large amount of general agreement, there was at certain points a difference of emphasis, to say the least, in our ways of holding the Idealistic creed. The lecture on 'The Criterion of Value' and the two lectures on 'The Absolute and the Finite Individual' may be mentioned as examples of what I mean.

It is possible that some readers may think that I have drawn too frequently upon the poets. That is perhaps a question of temperament. But my procedure was, at any rate, quite deliberate, for I accept Wordsworth's description of poetry as 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge', and I am even ready to be persuaded by Mr. Yeats that 'whatever of philosophy has been made poetry is alone permanent'.

In concluding this preface, I desire to thank the Senatus of the University of Aberdeen for the honour they did me in appointing me to the Lectureship. It has enabled me to bring together the reflections of many years, and I have striven, in return, to give them of my best.

To my brother, Professor James Seth, who read the lectures in manuscript, and to Professor H. R. Mackintosh, of New College, Edinburgh, and Mr. H. F. Hallett, M.A., who read the whole in proof, my warm thanks are also due for their ready help and valuable suggestions.

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,
December 20, 1916.

The reception accorded to these Lectures encourages me to hope that the book may continue to be found of service for some time. The call for a new edition has come while publishers are still hampered by difficulties of production and by the accumulations of the war. In these circumstances it has been decided to print the present edition from the plates of the American edition issued in 1917. This has made it impossible to introduce into the text more than verbal corrections, but I have been able to add, by way of appendix, a few supplementary notes referring to the more important criticisms and discussions to which the volume has given rise. Any attempt at mediation in a difficult dispute is necessarily exposed to attack from both sides, and this has happened to my attempt, in the second series of Lectures, to balance the claims of the Absolute and the individual or of monism and pluralism. But I have met with nothing to shake my confidence in the fundamental positions and lines of argument to which I had committed myself.

CONTENTS

FIRST SERIES

LECTURE I

HUME'S 'DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION'

LECTURE II

KANT AND THE IDEA OF INTRINSIC VALUE

LECTURE III

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY DUEL BETWEEN IDEALISM AND NATURALISM

LECTURE IV

THE LIBERATING INFLUENCE OF BIOLOGY

LECTURE V

THE LOWER AND THE HIGHER NATURALISM

LECTURE VI

MAN AS ORGANIC TO THE WORLD

LECTURE VII

ETHICAL MAN: THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY

LECTURE VIII

POSITIVISM AND AGNOSTICISM

LECTURE IX

IDEALISM AND PAN-PSYCHISM

LECTURE X

IDEALISM AND MENTALISM

SECOND SERIES

LECTURE XI

THE LOWER PANTHEISM AND THE DOCTRINE OF DEGREES OF TRUTH

LECTURE XII

THE CRITERION OF VALUE: ITS NATURE AND JUSTIFICATION

LECTURE XIII

THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL

LECTURE XIV

THE ABSOLUTE AND THE FINITE INDIVIDUAL

LECTURE XV

THE ABSOLUTE AND THE FINITE INDIVIDUAL (*Continued*)

LECTURE XVI

THE IDEA OF CREATION

LECTURE XVII

TELEOLOGY AS COSMIC PRINCIPLE

LECTURE XVIII

TIME AND ETERNITY

LECTURE XIX

BERGSONIAN TIME AND A GROWING UNIVERSE

LECTURE XX

PLURALISM—EVIL AND SUFFERING

LECTURE I

HUME'S 'DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION'

It is just two hundred years since the birth of the greatest Scotsman who ever applied himself to these subjects. In Academies and learned journals, even in the daily and weekly newspapers, during the past year [1] we have been celebrating the bicentenary of David Hume, and recalling to mind the achievements which gave him so conspicuous a place in the history of thought. It has seemed to me therefore not inappropriate to begin these lectures by some reference to Hume's pronouncement on those ultimate questions which Lord Gifford had in view in the foundation of this lectureship. The more so as we are not left in this matter to deductions, more or less probable, from Hume's general theory of knowledge; he has dealt with the theistic problem explicitly and at length in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion,* a work to which his biography shows that he attached unusual importance as the deliberate and carefully weighed expression of his conclusions on the greatest of all themes. Although Hume's mode of stating the question, his handling of the argument, as well as the nature of his conclusions, are in many ways strikingly different from those which naturally suggest themselves to a thinker of to-day, I have thought that these very differences of formulation and of emphasis render a statement of his position valuable as a background to our further discussion. And although I do not intend these lectures to be primarily historical in character, a certain amount of historical orientation is

[1] The first course of lectures was delivered during the University session, 1911-12.

indispensable, if only to enable us to understand how the question takes for us to-day the form it does.

The history of Hume's *Dialogues* is indeed curious, and the fortunes of the work have been, perhaps, hardly commensurate with the care taken by its author to ensure its survival. It was written in the maturity of Hume's powers, when he was completing his revision of his youthful conclusions in metaphysics and ethics and bidding a final farewell to philosophical speculation; and in his correspondence with Gilbert Elliot of Minto there is interesting evidence of the pains he bestowed on the balance of the argument. The terms in which he speaks of it are more appropriate to a personal document than to a purely literary performance. 'Tis not long ago', he writes, 'I burned an old manuscript book, wrote before I was twenty, which contained page after page the gradual progress of my thoughts on that head. It began with an anxious search after arguments to confirm the common opinion; doubts stole in, dissipated, returned; were again dissipated, returned again; and it was a perpetual struggle of a restless imagination against inclination, perhaps against reason.'

To Philo is assigned in the *Dialogues* the part of the sceptical objector—what Hume here describes as the struggle of a restless imagination—and because Philo's sceptical arguments are so entirely consonant with the general tenor of Hume's philosophy, it has been too common to take his utterances as representing by themselves Hume's own attitude to the question under discussion. But this is to ignore both the carefully constructed balance of the *Dialogues* and their avowed and deliberate conclusion. Hume admits, in the letter already quoted, that the part of Philo is one which admirably suited his temperament. 'I must confess, Philo,' says Cleanthes in the *Dialogues,* 'that of all men living, the task you have undertaken of raising doubts and objections suits you best.' And when Cleanthes further

rallies his 'ingenious friend' on the 'too luxuriant fertility' of his invention, which 'suppresses his natural good sense by a profusion of unnecessary scruples and objections', and on the 'strange lengths' to which his 'spirit of controversy, joined to his abhorrence of vulgar superstition' has carried him in the course of the argument, we seem to hear the echoes of one of Gilbert Elliot's letters at the time of the composition of the work. Hume replied to his correspondent that he wished his friend lived near enough to sustain in actual discussion the rôle of Cleanthes, the philosophical theist. Cleanthes, he explicitly says, is the hero of the piece, and he is anxious to see his position strengthened, if that be possible, against his own sceptical doubts in the mouth of Philo. He admits 'the strong propensity of the mind' towards the theistic conclusion, but he fears that 'unless that propensity were as strong and universal as that to believe in our senses and experience, it will be esteemed a suspicious foundation'. ''Tis here', he proceeds, 'I wish for your assistance; we must endeavour to prove that this propensity is somewhat different from our inclination to find our own figures in the clouds, our faces in the moon, our passions and sentiments even in inanimate matter.' There is good evidence, therefore, that Hume's purpose in the *Dialogues* was entirely serious, and the work as a whole is perhaps the most intimately personal expression of his views which we possess. It appears to be the outcome of something like a personal need to probe the question to the bottom, and to set down as carefully and dispassionately as possible both the positive and the negative results.

This is the view which is naturally suggested by the history of the manuscript and the deliberate publication of the volume as the philosopher's last bequest to the world he was leaving. For twenty-seven years Hume kept the manuscript by him. Rumours of the existence of such a work by 'the terrible David' had got abroad. Its negative