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Opening lect to Phil 9, 1897

Box 71, #1

Opening lecture of a course in Metaphysics

Philosophy IX. 1897-8.

Gentlemen:-

I begin herewith a course of lectures on Metaphysics. In our preliminary meeting we outlined for ourselves the purely practical aspect of the undertaking, - the text-books to be used, the kind of work expected of the individual student. Upon this occasion we begin the proper task of our course.

Metaphysics forms a branch of Philosophy. I may presuppose a certain general acquaintance, on the part of

all of you, with the nature of philosophic
study. But a brief summary of what is meant by Philosophy is
perhaps the best at the commencement of our task.
Philosophy is an effort to get a
reasoned solution of the ultimate pro
of human life. We all know how
full of problem
Some of these problems are relatively superficial.
They arise one day, to be forgotten by
the next day. How shall I find my way
home? asks the wanderer, during a walk,
a bicycle trip, or any other excursion
The Question possibly a little
returns, but need not
very lasting. A certain amount
care solves it,
then the affair is over. Such problem
belong to the passing hour. They are
fundamental. What is the mean

of this bit of news? asks (again), the reader of the daily paper. The exciting story of the (daily) mystery, — the dark tale of a murder, the report of some political intrigue — such a matter of mere gossip, revealed a problem attracts attention for a time, becomes the topic of a nine days wonder; and then, whether solved or unsolved, the problem thus presented passes (from notice), and is forgotten. Who inquires any longer into many newspaper mysteries ~~created~~ which may have seemed important during the (early part of the) last Presidential year, or in the midst of the last dull season, when the newsgatherers, in default

of other matters, amused their readers with sprightly and varied details of manifold domestic gossip, with tiny personages, with their suicides, and the like. Such problems, then, may seem at the moment trivial or tragic, wearisome or intensely engrossing; they may be solved, or may remain uncomprehended. But they show that they are in truth superficial problems by the very fact that they are soon forgotten. We turn from them to other problems as soon as they have had their day, they come, as we say, to lack actuality. Much deeper, in general, are the other problems, — the far more permanent human problems, that concern the dealing of nations, the social welfare of masses of men, the course of history. What is to be the future of

the British Empire, or of popular government in our own country, or of principal the great Asiatic nations? Is Russia the great power of the future? Is the coming form of government destined to be Socialistic? These are problems not of today or of tomorrow but of centuries. They are problems whose human and practical importance, during certain very long periods of time that are now before us, cannot easily be overestimated. But still more are not, in any sense, ultimate problems. For a glance at history shows us how all things human pass away, and how the most re-

mendous political and social issues
viewed merely in their external and historical aspect,
belong to some one time and region, and
are of small moment after a long
enough series of centuries have passed.
Humanity lives through them, and on through them.
Beneath the ruins of Assyrian cities
the modern archaeologists dig out for us
the remains of still earlier cities. There
was a king, they tell us, one Sargon, who
ruled in the valley of the Euphrates and
the Tigris about 3800 B.C. In his day,
and in those regions, there was, as
the discovered remnants already prove, a
high civilization existent. That civilization then
must have had
its social, its religious, its national problems

And no doubt, since it was a civilization, it had its own [illegible] & what its problems were [illegible] in its own present, unconscious that it belonged to any remote or primitive ages, that modern civilization turned back upon its own legendary antiquities, eagerly considered its questions of higher politics, dreamed of its future, and then sank, in time beneath its ruins. But the practical moment in our eyes today, are the most fundamental social and political issues of the reign of Sargon [illegible] unless indeed we are students of ancient history. These old issues were precisely in so far as they were the historical issues of [illegible] civilization. Our problems indeed resemble theirs, but are not the same. It follows, then, that the problems of any age of history, viewed simply as the issues presented by and in the external social life and destiny of any one group of nations, are not problems of the most fundamental

sort. For with the lapse of ages, these problems lapse also, and a new humanity faces new issues. To be sure, beneath the transient there is even here the eternal. The ethical problems of the age of Sargon are in many respects our own. But the political [illegible] of Sargon's reign [illegible]. Yet in another direction one can look for fundamental problems if one turns from the world of mere happenings to the world of the laws of nature, — from annals to natural science. At first sight it would seem as if the problems that any progressive natural science investigates are more fundamental, at least in one sense, than are the problems of history, viewed merely in their character as problems regarding the external

life and fortunes of any nation or group of nations. Some natural sciences, such for instance as geology, are largely concerned with past events, namely with the facts that constitute the history of the earth's crust. But in every natural science, precisely in so far as it is a science, the central interest lies in discerning laws, and to formulate as permanent as possible. And the problem: What are the permanent laws which get expressed in nature's processes? is not a problem that appears to belong to any one moment, or day, or age. In so far as, with any plausibility, we solve

such a problem, we seem to ourselves to be approaching very fundamental truth. For there could be no time when any interest in the permanent laws of nature could be said to become out of date, or when the problem as to what such laws are could be properly said to lapse, unless precisely in so far as it had been solved. And even when solved, such a problem would still retain its permanent interest as something which had to be taught afresh to each new generation of men. Very fact of the problem would secure, then, its lasting significance. Yet these problems of physical science, fundamental as, relatively

speaking, they appear to be, are not yet the most fundamental of human problems. And they are not the most fundamental for reasons which I will introduce as the criteria of the fundamental criteria. For the first any one of these problems always presupposes and implies certain still deeper questions. And the second place when taken together, these problems must lead, as science grows, to constantly new problems of generalization, and of a coordination of the results of science, and these resulting problems of generalization unified science at once go beyond the more special problems which I have in mind, and concern still more significant and central issues.

I repeat (1) that the problems of natural science presuppose and imply certain still deeper questions. This is

true because every scientific induction rests upon certain presupposed principles of Logic, of the theory of Knowledge, and of the metaphysical theory of Reality. These presuppositions no special science, in its own researches, makes a topic of inquiry. Yet every such presupposition involves problems that lie deeper than any special problem of natural science. We shall soon have occasion to consider this matter more in detail, and I need not here further develope the thought. Our whole metaphysical inquiry will show how profound are the problems that underlie every

special problem of natural science, without themselves receiving direct treatment within the limits of any such science. A single illustration may serve to remind us of the matters to which reference is here made. When a man learns about the law of gravitation, every study of the law presupposes a certain knowledge of what is meant by space, by matter, by motion, by time, and by quantity in general. For the law of gravitation is a certain assertion about measurable movements, that occur in time, or that tend to occur. These

movements in the masses of matter, and take place in space. In order to understand fully all that the law implies, one would have to answer all these deeper problems: What is time? What is space? What is matter, motion, &c. &c.? And these questions no special science answers. These problems then are implied by the assertion of the individual law, and they lie deeper than the particular problem which the law itself answers.

But I have said (2), that the problems of special science not only imply, when they are taken singly, problems which lie deeper than themselves, but also

lead, when taken together, to wider problems of generalization, and of coördination of the results of science. I have said that these resulting problems of generalized or unified science at once go beyond the more special problems, and concern still more significant and central issues. It is easy to illustrate this aspect of the study of science, and to show that it involves problems deeper than those of any special science. There is a series of modern discussions familiar to all readers of general works regarding life and the universe. I refer to the discussions that centre about the ~~word~~ term Evolution. A great number of

more special
scientific generalizations have gradually
grasped themselves into the (very fast readjusted) doctrine
that the natural world, as we at present
know it, is the outcome of a continuous
evolutionary process, whereby purely physical agencies
have at length that, as a result,
the varied and significant features of our
present world of life, of humanity, and
of worth have been produced, without a
break, from a world where once none of
this present life and worth existed, but where
its place was occupied by what we call in-
organic matter. Now the problem, how all

this evolutionary unity of nature, how all this growing of the higher from the lower, how all this derivation of life, of humanity, and of worth, from the apparently lifeless, the apparently inhuman, the apparently insignificant, — ~~[illegible]~~ how all this can have taken place, and how it is to be understood, is a problem at once far more extensive and far deeper than any question which a special science has to answer.

So far I have tried to illustrate in what (for the present purpose) some problems may be regarded as deeper than others, and in doing so I have tried

to lead your attention from the problems of the passing moment, viewed merely as transient problems, to problems that are not and not problems of philosophy proper. To sum up: a problem that is trivially has only a transient interest, is not so deep as is a problem that has a decidedly more permanent interest. If problems can be found whose rational interest is not a matter of one moment or of another, of today or of yesterday, but of all time, such bid fair, by virtue of their very timelessness of the matters concerned to be deeper than others. Yet this is not the only criterion in terms of which

the relatively fundamental character of a problem is to be estimated. Another, and still more valuable criterion is this: When the solution of a given problem logically presupposes conceptions and doctrines whose validity is assumed in this solution, then the ~~[illegible]~~ question as to the meaning and truth of these presupposed conceptions and doctrines lies deeper than the first problem itself, and constitutes a still more fundamental issue. Thus the physical

problem which is solved by the theory of gravitation is not so fundamental as are the problems about the nature of space, of time, of matter. Whereas for the theory of gravitation logically presupposes the conceptions of precisely these objects of thought. Finally, it appears that more universal problems, such as those about Evolution, are more fundamental than the special problems of this or that branch of science. To return now to the general definition of Philosophy. Philosophy is an effort to get a reasoned solution of the most fundamental, that is, of the ultimate problems of human life. And Metaphysics is a branch of Philosophy.

We have next to define what branch of Philosophy has been thus named.

The problems of human life, whatever their grade of depth, are of two familiar classes: they are either theoretical problems or practical problems. They are questions about what can be known, or they are questions about what ought to be done. Accordingly, Philosophy is usually divided into Theoretical and Practical Philosophy. Practical Philosophy, or Ethics, is concerned with the ultimate problems as to conduct, or in other words with the ultimate question as to what ought to be done, and as to the nature

(& Good and & Evil, & Right and & Wrong,
& the concepts) & Virtue & Sin and & Duty..

Theoretical Philosophy is concerned with the ultimate problems as to what can be known. Now Metaphysics is a branch, and in fact the principal branch, of theoretical philosophy. And the business of Metaphysics is the discussion of the ultimate questions as to what the Real World is.

To state the matter more technically, Metaphysics is that doctrine which undertakes to answer, as well as may be, two questions: —
(1) What is meant by the term

Reality, or by the adjective Real, as applied to the whole world, or to any being in the world? (2) What can be known about the true nature of the world, and of the beings in the world — in other words what can be known about the objects to which we apply the term Reality, and the adjective Real?

Introductions to a doctrine are tedious, and I dislike to spend any long time in explaining to you, in any merely preliminary fashion, the reasons why a general doctrine dealing with reality in general is a desirable understanding. But

some preparations for our later work are still necessary. Let me then next try to show you a little more clearly the special inquiry which the foregoing definition assigns to metaphysics. What is Reality? With this question, according to our definition, the work of metaphysical discussion begins. And the question, in its first form, concerns, not yet directly the problems as to the nature of the universe, but the meaning of a very familiar term, of use in daily life. When, for example, we call the things met with in our dreams _unreal_. When our hopes are defeated, we say that there was something _unreal_ about the objects or the bases of these hopes. On the other hand, we call the solid earth beneath our feet _real_. And we say that our friends, in whom we thoroughly trust, are

real friends. In a similar way, when one, recalling or narrating his former experience, remembers past events, or seems to himself to remember them, the question may arise as to whether what he reports really was as he reports it, or whether his apparent memories stand for real past events. Men have believed, in the course of ages, in all manner of supernatural beings, - ghosts, witches, angels, demons, fairies, gods. Were such beings, all or any of them, real beings, or were they delusions, unrealities? Geometers define certain ideal figures, such as circles, ellipses, parabolas. As defined, these ideal figures have certain absolutely exact characters.

But, technically regarded, the manufacture of physical objects that precisely conform to these mathematical ideals proves to be impossible. The question arises: Are the circles, or other curves of the geometer, realities at all, (or are they mere mathematical ideals? (complete in the universe)

These illustrations begin to make clear that the adjective real, the noun reality, and the corresponding negative words unreal, and unreality, have meanings which are of fundamental importance, and which are also somewhat (complex and) obscure. Just what have past

events, and present perceptions, permanent physical things, and passing states of our own minds, just what, I say, have all these in common that makes us call them <u>real</u>? What again is the sort of reproach, as it were, or irony conveyed in speaking of dreams, and false shows of friendship, as unreal? What is it to be unreal? How can we then recognize the unreality of any real? Or, to pass to another case, how is the <u>real</u> related to that other word <u>ideal</u> which we just used in referring to the mathematical figures. If one says that the false friend's show of friendship was unreal, one

seems to convey a sense, as I just said, of reproach, or of contempt. The unreal is, as such, vain, unimportant, to be neglected. The unreal terrors of our dreams are to be despised when we are awake. The unreal displays of friendship by the false friend, once detected, are to be thenceforth ignored. On the other hand, however, the objects called ideal, whether in the realm of mathematics, of morals, or of art, have a different and curious relation to the objects called real and unreal. The term ideal is in fact a very puzzling and important one, in all its various meanings; and its relations to the

term real form one of the most perfect of metaphysical scenes. The terms real and ideal have, in fact, a great tendency to introduce strange places in our thoughts and in our expressions. We talk of real life, and mean perhaps at first the mass of commonplace ~~[illegible]~~ or of painful happenings of which so much of human existence is made up. In real life the ~~[illegible]~~ are crowded with ~~[illegible]~~ poor people, whose children multiply, are squalid, and have a high death rate. In real life there are loathsome diseases,

greedy wealth-seekers, disappointments, partings, funerals, crimes. In real life nobody does in manhood what he hoped to do when he was young. Hunger and love appear to rule the real human world. The struggle for existence is everywhere. That is one view. But over against all this realm of passion and of distress one sees, in mind, another realm, — a realm of ideals. Love can be ideal; it need not be mere brute passion. There might be devotion, charity, loyalty, brotherhood. These are ideals of what is possible. But is a life of such virtues ever real?

Yes, (in a measure; for) there are good people. We do not
world of so-called real life, in all its
squalor and baseness, is lit up with
some glimpses of what conforms to
ideals. But then is this partial realization
of the ideal all? No, there are novels which
lead us to look upon the world of human
life otherwise. In such novels we see
that it is the ordinary everyday life
which is more or less the illusion, and
it is the ideal side of life which is the
only real aspect. I need hardly dwell
upon the methods that lead to such
a transformation. I am not yet

teaching doctrine, but am only illustrating views and problems. Every man in youth, if not later, knows some haunting moments when he says: "The ideal is the only true reality; the rest is but froth and fragment." A moment of culture-doom comes, as it came to the young men of the days of the civil war. At such times one says: "What is one so-called-real life, that we should think so much of its problems, of its pangs, and of its hopes? There is another life, — the life of devotion to a great cause. That life alone faces the deepest realities. Duty is such a reality.

The service (one's) country, loyalty to one's trust, faith and honor and the love of one's woman, these are the only realities in the light of which one can try to live. And if one so lives, what matters it just what happens. Turn day to day, or who lives or dies." Such a mood, I say, is possible, whatever its justification. It is a moral reduction for all identifies the real with that which has been called the ideal. It seeks a city of Right, cares little for the fortunes of the moment, and calls that most real which the every day cit- izen(s) least verifies.

Whatever one may think of such views, nobody can doubt that they have played a great part in human history. Believing in ideals as being somehow more real than the visible facts are, has been a prime factor in human civilization. The Roman Empire was once a visible reality. The barbarians overthrew what had been its outward show of power; but the Roman Empire still exists, in various changed forms, because it was an ideal, so fixed in the minds even of the very barbarians themselves, that they could not let it die. Thus is only one instance where a faith in ideals has proved

more potent than the most elemental passions of man in determining the course of history. Other instances there are in great numbers.

Yet it is not fair to this tendency to treat the so-called ideal as real if we thus mention only the cases where romantic or moral devotion treats the ideal as real. In a wholly different realm a similar problem meets us. Every student of mathematics will have felt the force of the problem of which I spoke a few moments ago, namely the problem whether the constructions of geometrical science are themselves realities, or are

what one usually means by the phrase ~~circle~~ mere ideals. Is there such a thing as a real circle? In the ~~usual~~ physical sense of the word real, we can be, for well known reasons, fairly certain that we are unacquainted with any real material bodies whose sections or surfaces present us with perfectly circular forms. If there were any such physical bodies, we can well say that it would be impossible for us, with any instruments at our disposal, to assure ourselves of their perfectly circular character. So far does the mathematical ideal transcend our physical experience. On the other

Circle, we certainly very well know what a circle is. That remarkable quantity π, the ratio of circumference and diameter, i.e. the value that has been computed to many hundreds of decimal places, far far beyond the reach of the most careful practical physical verification, even were a perfect physical circle presented to us for study, and even were our present powers of physical measurement increased a billion fold. And now does that quantity π stand for any fact that is real outside of the minds of geometers. If it does, then there is some peculiar sense in.

which certain ideal constructions of the geometer possess a reality which no physical experience can verify. But if this is not so, if the geometer's ideals are merely ideals, then just what is their relation to reality. For there can be no doubt that our success and assurance in applying geometry to physics indicates some deep relation between the constructions of mathematical science, and the realities called physical.

I have thus endeavored to illustrate something of the nature of those problems which can occur concerning the meaning of

such familiar words as real, unreal, and ideal. Well, (problems like these are the elementary problems of the doctrine called Metaphysics. You see, I presume, that the problems are somewhat familiar. I may venture to hope that you already also see that these problems are not only familiar, but fundamental, and important.

Now the purpose of Metaphysics is, first, to undertake to deal with these problems as to the meanings of the words real, reality, ideal, unreal, and related words. Such related words are the terms being, existence, actuality, and other synonyms

of the term reality, synonyms to which, in certain cases, somewhat special meanings have been given. The relation of these words to such terms as truth and falsity will also belong to our task. In another direction such adjectives as possible, necessary, and the like, will give us much ground for inquiry. What do we mean by calling a given object not real, but possible, or as we sometimes say, actually possible? What is a possibility? Is a possibility a reality, or not? Such, and numerous other problems of the meaning of familiar terms, will

come to our notice. It will be our purpose to treat these problems in a thoroughgoing fashion, not as merely verbal problems, but as inquiries into fundamental matters. For all such terms are mere efforts to fix ideas of the profoundest moment for our whole view of our relations to the world.