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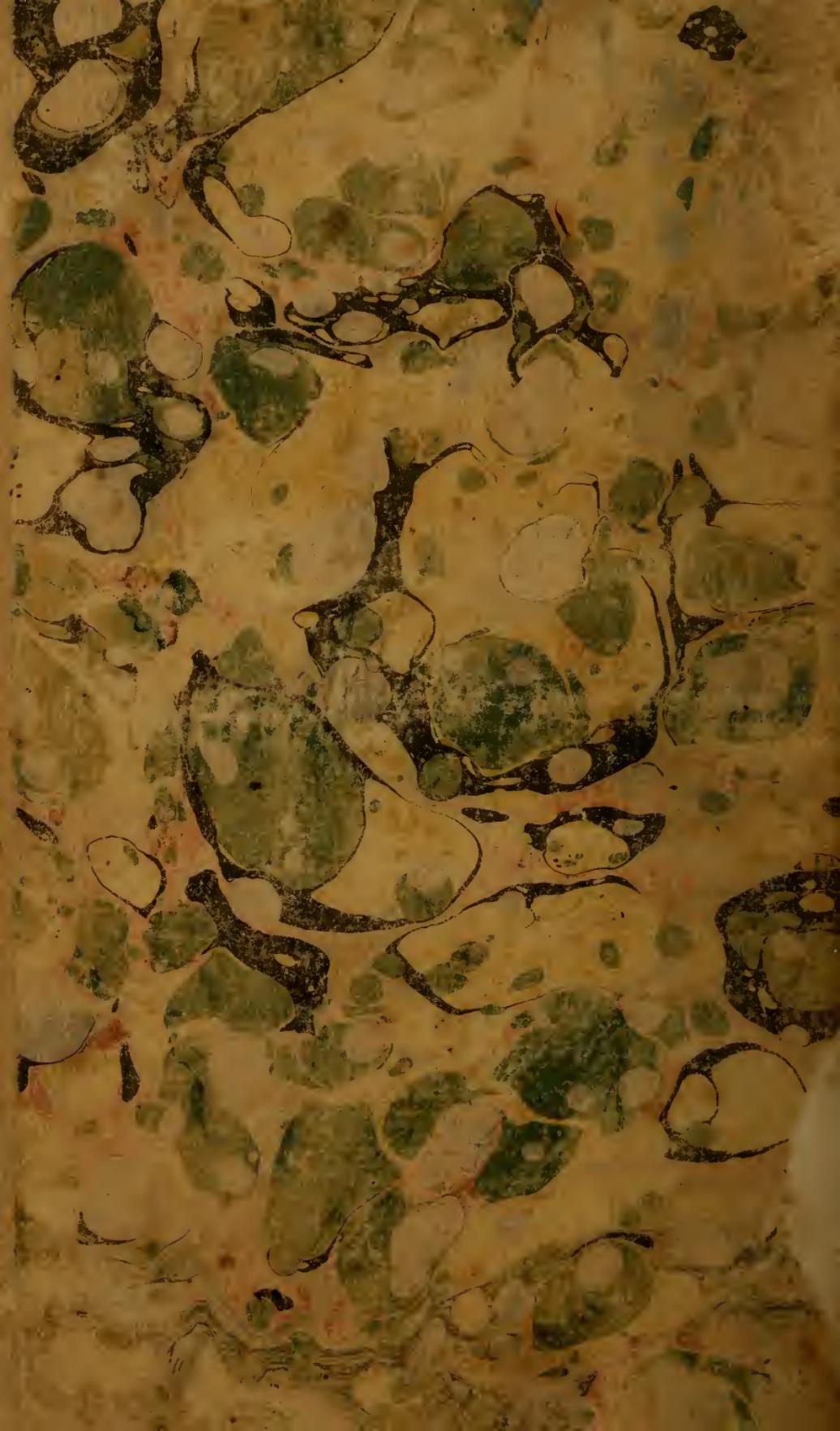
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AN

ADDRESS

TO THE

UTICA LYCEUM,

Delivered, February 17, 1825.

BY

A. B. JOHNSON,

PREFATORY TO HIS

COURSE OF LECTURES

ON THE

Philosophy of Human Knowledge.

UTICA,

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No. 40, Genesee Street.

1825.

ADDRESS.

Mr. President, and Gentlemen of the Lyceum,

It is my misfortune to possess a strong inclination for abstruse studies. Its indulgence has diminished my convivial enjoyments, and employed the ardour which, at my age, is usually expended in political discussions;—vociferous in the defence of rights not invaded, and vindictive in the redress of wrongs not inflicted. It has driven me from the sagacious whispers of the counting-house, and the loquacious war of judicatories, to an unambitious avocation; which, whilst it affords the conveniences that our plainness renders essential, enables me to gratify my unenviable propensity.

Among the results is a treatise on the Philosophy of Human Knowledge. From the deep occlusion in which my life has passed, I have reason to suspect an absence, rather than the possession of instructive talents; hence the treatise has long lain unregarded, and, till within a few days, undivulged. An accidental intimation of its existence, has produced from the Lyceum a request, with which I shall endeavour to comply, by moulding the treatise into short, and occasional lectures.

Man exists in a world of his own creation. He cannot step, but on ground transformed by culture; nor look, but on objects produced by art. The animals which constitute his food are unknown to nature, while trees, fruits and herbs are the trophies of his labour. His virtues, language, actions, sentiments, and desires are nearly all factitious. Stupendous in achievement, he is boundless in attempts. Having subdued the surface of the earth, he would explore its centre; having vanquished diseases, he would subdue death. Unsatisfied with recording imperishably the past, he would anticipate the future. Uncontented with subjugating the ocean, he would traverse the air. Success seems but to sharpen his avidity; while facility augments his impatience. Thus restless, it is important to know the extent of our powers, that we may not dissipate strength in designs for which our faculties are unsuited; or attempt practicabilities by incompetent methods. This knowledge is the philosophy which I propose to discuss.

But this is not all. Nothing is too sacred for our curiosity;—nothing too remote;—nothing too minute. There is in language an illimitable capacity for interrogation, and its excessive exercise constitutes the folly of wisdom, and the wisdom of folly. Philosophy is deemed a species of necromancy, which can solve all questions;—countervail the impossibility of access, and remedy the finitude of the senses. Hence it is important to ascertain whether all inquiries are perti-

nent; how far we may rationally conjecture, and where ignorance is incurable.

But even these are not all. Language is mouldable into countless propositions. Mathematics assure us, that the water which placidly swells the banks of our canal, is no where level;—that the walls, which constitute the sides of this chamber, are not parallel; that a line, no longer than an inch, is diminishable interminably without arriving at the end of extension.

Astronomy declares, that we are whirled every *moment* a thousand miles in one direction, and fifteen miles in another; and in this giddy rotation our heads travel faster than our bodies; that a portion of mankind walk with their feet diametrically opposite to ours; that the world is a ball, and assumes at a certain distance, the appearance of a star; that comets are hotter than red iron, and the sun a body of fire thirteen hundred thousand times larger than the earth.

Opticks assert, that while I look around our village, and perceive distant hills, and spacious streets, lofty buildings, and prosperous industry; I truly see nothing, which is either spacious or distant, but a wonderful miniature, not an inch in diameter, that is painted on the retina of my eyes.

Physiology affirms, that a ray of light, which appears colourless, is a gaudy combination; while roses are a mere blank apparatus to display the tints which exist latently in light. Botany has, however, com-

pensated flowers for this disparagement. She insists, that plants eat, drink, sleep and breathe;—that they are male and female;—that their fragrance is amorous sighs, and their motions nervous irritability.

Chymistry is peculiarly the science of enchantment. Its motto is to degrade all that is high, and exalt all that is low. It professes to remedy the defects of vision:—to elaborate by analysis what would be apparent in nature were our senses more acute. It asserts that glass is not uniform and transparent, but a congeries of opaque sand and salt;—that our flesh is not the firm, polished substance which it appears, but a combination of disgusting gases;—that the diamond which sparkles on the breast of beauty, is charcoal that defiles the hands of blacksmiths.

To deny these assertions, is to disbelieve the best demonstrated conclusions. There exists a pruriency in every science, to thus irritate curiosity by an apparent contradiction of our senses; and to exalt phenomena by a novel application of names:—hence it is important to discover some test by which we can ascertain the significancy of language when so employed, that we may no longer be perplexed with deductions which logick cannot controvert, and which the senses cannot admit.

You perceive then, that the Philosophy of Human Knowledge deserves attention. There has always existed an indefinite impression that such a science is attainable. It has been to metaphysics, what alchymy has, to chymistry; or what per-

petual motion has been to mechanics;—sufficiently plausible to stimulate our efforts, and sufficiently subtle to elude them.

In such a science, I must however, confess myself a believer; though the progress which has been made in it, is inconsiderable. The labours of antiquity have descended to us embarrassed with mutilation and obsolescence. Yet we may discover, that ancient metaphysics consisted principally in the formation of general propositions, which, though dictated by the senses, were supposed authoritative beyond their purview. Thus, it was maintained, that “nothing can be created out of nothing;” hence that the power of deity, in the construction of the world, extended only to arrange materials, which were co-eternal with himself. Clouds and darkness soon enveloped such speculations, and reason looked aghast at the monsters of its own invention.

With modern writers also, the science is in its infancy. Etymology has pursued it through all the tortuous wanderings of words, up to their pristine signification. Discovering hence, that *spirit* signified originally *breath*, she concludes that the word has still no other import. Instead therefore of expounding a word, by narrating the phenomena to which it is now affixed; she seeks its meaning by groping for the phenomena to which it was originally applied:—overlooking the most important characteristic of language, that every word possesses as many meanings, as it possesses applications to different phenomena.

Induction is another method, by which our science has been attempted. We upbraid the ancients with reasoning from general propositions to particular facts. This process induction reverses. She discovers, that my hand cannot draw on a glove without touching the glove; that you cannot light a candle, unless an igniting body be conveyed to the candle: hence induction forms a general proposition, "that nothing can act where it is not." The proposition would be abundantly harmless, were it deemed significant of those facts only, from which it is elaborated; but induction estimates facts as the mere ladder by which she is enabled to climb beyond the senses; then, like the ambition described by Shakespeare,

"She unto the ladder turns her back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which she did ascend."

Lord Monboddo maintained, that, (as nothing can act where it is not,) when we see distant objects, our soul passes from us to the object. The conclusion was too gross to be permanent, therefore we now suppose, that sight is produced by rays, which rebound from visible objects, to the optic nerve;—that sound is conveyed by appulses of air, which strike the tympanum; and that smells are diffused by small corpuscles, which are wafted to the olfactory nerve.

There is still another way in which philosophy has expended itself, when employed metaphysically. We shew to a child an iron red with heat,

and we assure him that pain will follow its contact. The monition vanishes with the iron, never to recur, but on a recurrence of the danger.—Painfully industrious, we peruse biography, theology, legal intricacies, and medical properties. To nature we unheedingly commit the whole unsorted, unarranged. Yet, a hero's name no sooner strikes the portals of hearing, than memory, like an officious chronicler, announces his fortunes, qualities and actions. A legal injury summons all the methods of redress:—anticipation awards a verdict, and imagination exults in the triumph.

These are briefly the services of thought. Its ministrations are incessant, its uses infinite; and they are divisible, by the copiousness of language, into recollection, retrospection, anticipation, ratiocination, imagination, deliberation, and various other operations. But, instead of recording the phenomena, and leaving them to be marshalled under the names which use shall determine; philosophers have considered the marshalling to be their province: hence, what is denominated the philosophy of mind, consists of but little more than a contentious verbal criticism.

Such then is the present state of the philosophy, which I propose to investigate. Judgment is wearied in examining chimeras, that possess no interest but their deformity; and exploring labyrinths which have no merit but intricacy. The science has long lost the favour of practical men, and is almost abandoned, with alchemy and catholicons, to

the dreams of enthusiasm. These are formidable impediments, and they are peculiar to this science. But there are many others, which are incident to the promulgation of every new doctrine; and, that you may behold the extent of my temerity, I will adduce a few of them.

Words may be compared to music. When a Briton listens to a certain tune of Handel, the notes articulate distinctly, "God save great George the King;" but, when an American hears it, the notes articulate "God save great Washington." Hence the difficulty in understanding a strange doctrine. The words will constantly excite old opinions, though the speaker intends new.

When Columbus informed the Spaniards that he had discovered a new world, inhabited by men; the Spaniards attached to the word man its ordinary signification, nor were they undeceived, till Columbus exhibited the natives. I saw once, in a Roman Catholic cathedral, a wax candle burning before the altar: you will suppose that the word candle intimates sufficiently my meaning, but it will be wholly unrevealed;—what I saw, possessed the circumference of my arm, and the height of this table.

Of the mistakes to which we are thus liable, I can adduce nothing more explanatory, than the philosophy of Epicurus. He maintained, that happiness consists in pleasure. Shortly, every libertine sought protection under this philosophy; and now, its name is synonymous with luxurious sensuality. But fortunately for the reputation of the

philosopher, we eventually discover, that the pleasure, to which Epicurus alluded, is virtue.

Modern researches escape not obscurations equally gross. We read of volcanoes that are discovered in the moon;—of immense mountains nine miles perpendicular,—in the moon; of a country six thousand miles in circumference, devoid of atmosphere and water,—in the moon; of awful chasms as broad as oceans and as deep,—also in the moon. We read, likewise, of small planets that were created by the explosion of a great planet; and that the roofs of houses would appear, (if we could divest ourselves of prejudice,) lower than the foundations. These expressions are amply significant, when correctly understood; but whoever shall affix to the words their ordinary import, will err as widely as the remote disciples of Epicurus.

Such examples should instruct us, that the puerilities of ancient metaphysics, had probably a sensible signification to their authors; and should restrain our perverse assumption, that every writer is to be literally interpreted, though we thereby make him utter the greatest absurdities. Ancient speculations of the above description, are frequently made significant by modern discoveries. After we acquire thus, a meaning to the heretofore unintelligible sentences, we announce that the ancient author intended the modern signification, though probably nothing was farther from his apprehension. This principle induces us to attribute to Pythagoras, the astronomical system of Copernicus; and enables us

to discover in Homer, a profundity of knowledge that he never conceived; and to find, in the general suggestions of Bacon, every art and science that has succeeded him.

The next obstacle, which every new doctrine encounters, is prejudice. When Copernicus asserted the sun's quiescence, the theory was deemed subversive of scripture, which declares that Joshua protracted day by arresting the sun. Better interpreters have succeeded in establishing, that the prolongation of day constituted the only material fact; and if Deity should even now promulge the process, it would surpass our comprehension.

This historical instance is trite, but very illustrative of the identification of erroneous conclusions with indisputable truths. Whatever contradicts the former, we deem incompatible with the latter. Such prejudices oppose a sturdy barrier, against any new doctrine connected with human knowledge; for on no subject are artificial conclusions so widely diffused, and implicitly believed. Every man possesses some metaphysical system which he has imbibed he knows not how; and credits, he knows not why. Its incomprehensibility renders him sensitive to its preservation. It is an unfortunate child, whose very idiocy endears it to his feelings.

Besides, every science is so encumbered with propositions which are hostile to the information of our senses, that repugnance to them has ceased

from obstructing credibility; hence the most subtle deductions, and extended analogies are implicitly adopted by the illiterate as phenomena, which, though above their perception, are pervious to the learned. You cannot find a person who does not as readily believe that the earth moves, as that his cart moves. The word motion, he supposes to possess the same signification in both cases; while truly, when applied to the earth, it means certain phenomena only, which are explicable in no way so well as by assuming a motion of the earth. The earth's motion means all the proofs which can be adduced in support of the theory. Whoever believes that the motion purports more, is deceived by language.

Amid this dreary host of ambiguities, prepossessions, and prejudices, exist a few enlivening auxiliaries. When Cicero visited the groves of Academus, Socrates had long been sacrificed to envy, and his great disciple had realized, in eternity some of their sublime conjectures. Yet Cicero's imagination re-peopled the Academy. It saw Plato surrounded by the youth of Athens, and heard his eloquence captivate again the understanding. Why then, may not a name produce enthusiasm now, and our Lyceum gleam with a faint glory from a recollection of the immortal Aristotle, the founder of the first Lyceum, and the Philosopher to whom the honour is due of discovering the only principle on which reasoning must forever depend: a discovery which time can-

not simplify nor enlarge; which eulogy has been unable to obscure by comment, or prejudice to subvert by proscription; and which teaches, that argumentation may mould knowledge into new forms of speech, but cannot extend it beyond our premises.

In oral instruction to voluntary auditors, the speaker must conciliate his hearers, or he is taught by the solitude, which soon environs him, that his labours are vain. Hence the Grecian philosophers were the most eloquent men of their age; while probably, from a resort either to typography, or lectures to involuntary hearers, philosophy exhibits now no traces of fascination. Usually, it combines slovenly composition with sterility of ornament; and custom has even moulded these deformities into a canon of criticism. Professor Blair recommends the style of Locke's essay as a model: a work which, though it carries the philosophy of knowledge, as far as it has yet been extended; presents no page that will not bear an expunction of a quarter of its words, with benefit to perspicuity.

Philosophy is however, not necessarily, the frowning, sluggish divinity, that her ministers have injudiciously represented. Her dress may be splendid, her decorations brilliant; the clearest light should always illuminate her throne, and disputation be banished from her presence. Under this apprehension of her character will my lowly sacrifices be administered at her altar. I pause at this promise! I feel that all the stimulation which your benevolence can yield will be necessary to

my perseverance. Nay, if I stagnate in the midst of your kindest efforts, the result will disappoint my hopes, rather than my expectations.

When fame has produced for an individual an elevation to which all eyes are continually directed;—when his opinions are impatiently expected, and rapidly disseminated; when they are applauded in anticipation, and their adoption secured by prepossessions; the labour of composition assimilates to the progress, through Spain, of the Duke of Angouleme,—a progress in which every city was approached, but to be entered with a bloodless triumph; and every enemy pursued but to be received with a resistless surrender:—a progress whose labour is only the fatigue of pleasure; and whose dangers are merely the inebriation of success.

Startled at the difference between such a writer and me, I have, more than once, cast aside my pen as an insidious enemy, that lures me from the substantial pursuits of life, with an unreal mockery. Even the consolation of yielding an amusement to you cannot well be expected, and whilst I have been distracted in seeking a worthy motive for exertion, I have not been without apprehensions that I may, unconsciously, be influenced by the demon who, more than any other, revels in our infirmities. The demon who makes the taciturn more egregiously dull, and the volatile more absurdly loquacious; who makes ill timed gravity more strongly contract its brows, and incessant levity more broadly relax its muscles.

The demon, at whose pernicious suggestion, even moral deformities are frequently heightened. Surgeons, thus induced, will boast of an insensibility, that they cannot feel; and libertines of profligacy that they never practised. The avaricious will falsely magnify his selfishness, and the prodigal his expenses. The liar will laugh at an exaggerated recital of his infamy, and the extortioner at an aggravated list of his oppressions. Nor do the infirmities of nature escape the malice of this universal counsellor. Dwarfs, at his suggestion, endeavour to appear smaller, and giants larger. The stammerer he urges to incessant conversation, and the freckled to an unnecessary nudity.

Whilst I was reflecting on the eccentricities, which proceeded from his persuasion, imagination presented him unexpectedly before me. His language was harmonious;—his actions were profoundly respectful. Delight hung upon his lips, and irresistible conviction accompanied his communication. An unusual complacency expanded my breast. I arose from an indolent recumbency; extended my arms in the attitude of oratory, and prepared to welcome him with all the figures of eloquence. When suddenly, approaching the fiend, his eyes were averted, and his face was distorted with laughter. He dissolved into air, and, as he vanished, I discovered that his name was *Vanity*.

Hon. John Adams

With the best respects
of the author

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