

Sessional address of the President (Mr. Serjeant Cox), November 4th, 1875.

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Psychological Society of Great Britain.

*Sessional Address of the President (MR. SERJEANT
COX), November 4th, 1875.*

AT the commencement of the Second Session of this Society, the Council have desired to observe the practice of many scientific associations in presenting to the members through the President a summary of the progress made during the Session past and the prospects and promises of the Session beginning. It is with peculiar pleasure that I do their bidding now, because I have little to report that will not be received with great satisfaction, by the members of our Society, as indeed by all who take an interest in the great and important Science for the advancement of which we are associated. The mere fact that this Society is alive and likely to live is a matter for hearty congratulation with Psychologists everywhere, for it was formed and is flourishing in despite of many confident prophecies of failure to find supporters, of impracticability in the subjects to be handled, and impossibility to obtain a hearing either from the scientific world or from the public outside, that were lavished upon the first publication of a design for the formation of a Society for the promotion of Psychology. These evil prophesyings would have sufficed to deter from exertion almost any but the earnest men who had united their energies in the full con-

viction that Psychology is a science as real and substantial as Physiology or Biology; that it is not, as its opponents aver, a vague and visionary pursuit, dealing only with cobwebs of the brain, having no foundation in facts and not to be proved by observation and experiment. We had, all of us, the most confident conviction that Psychology is as solid and real a Science as are any of the Physical Sciences; that it is to be pursued by the same processes and with equal reliance upon the results of investigations into actual phenomena, instead of the metaphysical abstractions and the delusive study of the inner consciousness, by which its progress has been impeded hitherto. We had, also, a profound conviction that Psychology had been lately growing in the estimation of the public, who were beginning to perceive its important bearings upon the past, the present, and the future of the human race. The fact was patent to all who mingled with educated society that the uninquiring faith which had induced the almost universal acceptance of the existence and immortality of Soul as an indisputable truth was being widely disturbed by the doctrines of materialism, which professed to show by scientific evidence that this faith was not justified—that Soul was a dream or a dogma merely. There had long been plainly visible to all who looked behind the scenes of society a painful disturbance of mind that induced among the thoughtful an anxious desire to find some gleam of hope somewhere, some path that might conduct to a determination of the painful doubts that oppressed them. Psychology opened to them this prospect. Psychology recognises at least the possibility of some mechanism of Man other than the material structure, and it proposes for its mission to inquire if there be *in fact* any such non-corporeal being, and, if it be, what are its nature and characteristics? This is the cause of the vastly increased interest in this once neglected science that has shown itself

of late in so many forms. Psychology and its kindred subjects have been more and more made themes for discussion in the newspapers, indicating that they find many interested readers. Still more frequently is it made the topic of conversation in society. Books treating of it continue to come in fast increasing numbers from the press and find large circles of readers. In brief, there is every indication that the subject is becoming popular. As is the invariable practice when any topic of any kind, and especially any science, has reached the stage of popularity, Psychology has been eagerly seized upon by the herd of charlatans, cheats, and mountebanks who feed upon the brains of others and trade upon the weaknesses of credulity or fanaticism. The phenomena of Mind and Soul, invested as they are with a certain novelty and encompassed with something of mystery and strangeness, have been turned to purposes of profit by impudent impostors and misrepresented and magnified by unreflecting enthusiasts. In such a state of public opinion it was thought by the Promoters that a Society would be welcomed that should devote itself to the investigation of Psychology, with no other purpose than to ascertain, so far as may be, the very truth of it, without respect for any prejudice and with no fear of any consequences from discovery of the truth. We were, of course, not unprepared for hostility from two opposite quarters, from the Materialists, who are so firm in their own faith that they will not admit the possibility of any existence not material, and therefore deny to Psychology the dignity of a Science, and from zealots, who, admitting the existence of Soul, assert that it is the province of themselves alone to deal with it; that it must be received only as a faith and that to search after it as a *fact* is to abjure the faith. But neither of these adversaries has in practice proved so powerful as we had feared. The former have not ventured upon any open act of hostility, although whisperings and objections have not been wanting in private. The latter have shown

an unexpected reluctance to enter into a conflict, and not a few of those from whom we had looked for opposition have not merely spoken and written favourably of the Society, but have intimated an intention to join its ranks.

It was in such a condition of the public mind in relation to Psychology that this Society issued its prospectus. The result has far surpassed the anticipation of any of its promoters. From all parts of the country have come words of encouragement and promises of support. In a week success was assured. The first meeting will not readily be forgotten. The great room was crowded and many were unable to find a place. Opponents and friends were equally eager to learn what the Society proposed for the subjects of its inquiries and its methods of pursuing them. But whatever the motives that attracted the assembly, their coming showed this, at least, how great and widespread was the interest taken in the subjects of our labours. The inaugural address was designed to explain to the audience and to the public what was "the Province of Psychology," as understood by the Society, and which may be briefly expressed as being "the investigation of the Forces by which the Material Mechanism of Man is moved and directed—namely LIFE, MIND, and SOUL." The method by which it was proposed to pursue it, was to be this, precisely as other Sciences are pursued, by collection of *facts* and *phenomena*, and by discussions, written and oral, upon the conclusions reasonably to be drawn from those facts. It is thus that Physiology is investigated, and there is nothing in *Psychology* to except it from the principles and methods of study that applied to all other branches of Natural Science. The Sciences of Magnetism and Electricity are learned by observation of and experiment upon the action upon perceptible matter of forces that are themselves imperceptible. So we contend that Psychology must be learned by observation of and experiment with the perceptible *action* upon the material structure of the *Vital, Mental, and*

Psychic Forces which, like the forces of Magnetism and Electricity, are themselves imperceptible.

This programme of the practical scheme of the Society was widely circulated and extensively noticed by the press; by some severely criticised, by many warmly eulogised, by others abused, according to the preconceptions of the several reviewers. The objections were, however, not so various as numerous. They resolved themselves into the following:

The first was that, raised at the meeting—to the rigid exclusion of Theological discussion and reference.

To discuss Soul, its being and its destiny, without reference to Theology is, it was contended, to exclude all that we can possibly know about it. One reviewer read to myself personally a very grave rebuke for having permitted this exclusion of authority. On the other hand, some sceptical writers were equally desirous that advantage should be taken of the Society for the promulgation of *anti-religious* opinion and argument. Thus, by two opposing parties, there was a desire to make Psychology a cloak for promulgating doctrinal views that are in direct antagonism. This fact alone is conclusive as to the prudence of our resolution. The very purpose of our being is to investigate *scientifically*, not theologically. We are working with express design to ascertain if there be any or what *proofs* to be found *in nature* of the existence of Soul, what Mind is, what Life is, and what relationship they bear to each other—not what *opinions* this or that sect, or men, or creed, or dogma, maintain about them. To permit theological reference would be to drown discussions of Psychological questions in disputes about theological *authority*. All men may be brought to agree about scientific *facts* and even differ without quarrelling about the inferences to be drawn from them; but if Mr. Smith were permitted to quote a text as conclusive, Mr. Jones would dispute the authority of the text, or cite some other, and the evening would be occupied

in endless conflict, properly raised in a sectarian assembly, but utterly out of place in a scientific meeting. The rule is not ours only. It is common to *all* societies whose object is the pursuit of pure science. What, for instance, would become of the Geological Society if it were permitted to the speakers to cite theological authority? It would not exist for a month; and, if sanctioned here, the life of the Psychological Society would be equally stormy and equally brief.

So far from being in antagonism, Psychology will render to Theology invaluable service by proving the *faith* in Soul to be a *fact* and the teachings of authority to be truths in Nature.

Another objection proceeded from an opposite quarter and is entitled to more respect. An extensive and important class of mental and psychical phenomena (not yet *scientifically* investigated with a view to learn by careful experiment and conclusive tests what are their true nature and sources), have been made the basis of what may be termed a religion, on certain unproved assumptions as to the agencies by which they are produced. By the votaries of this sect our Society was assailed because it did not give to Spiritualism (which is the name assumed by this new faith) a prominent place in its programme. "You ignore," they said, "a series of phenomena directly associated with Psychology and strive to build up a science without the facts that most bear upon it."

Our answer is brief. "We do, and intend to do, nothing of the kind. We do not recognise your theory of *causes*; we cannot accept the assumption upon which you have erected your faith and taken your title. We do not venture without investigation to assert that you are wrong; but we hold that your assumption is as yet wholly unproved according to the reasonable requirements of scientific evidence. The asserted phenomena require to be examined by more crucial tests and more cautious experiment than have been

yet applied to them before their existence, and still more, their extent and nature, can be accepted as the basis upon which to found scientific conclusions. From their very nature, and from the conditions of their manifestation, they are peculiarly liable to be the subjects for imposture by knaves and delusion by dupes. Frauds are confessedly frequent and therefore nothing can be accepted as *proved* that is not obtained under tests that are *crucial* and by evidence that is *conclusive*. Ask us to apply such tests and offer to us such evidence, and the Society will gladly try the truth of any asserted phenomena without prejudice and report of them honestly. As yet you have shown to Science nothing more than that there is something that demands patient investigation. But your very name assumes a conclusion which a society for scientific research cannot recognise. The asserted facts and phenomena will, indeed, be entitled to and will receive a fair examination in common with all other facts and phenomena relating to Psychology, and, so far as they are found to be true, will be admitted to that store-house of facts which it is the primary purpose of all scientific societies to accumulate and without which no science can be securely constructed."

Although the Society began its labours only as the season was drawing to a close, its short session of two months was fruitful in performance and still more in promise. Papers were read on "Memory;" on "The Phenomena of Sleep and Dream;" and on "The Duality of the Mind;" and each elicited a lively and interesting discussion, in which many curious facts were narrated and much new light thrown upon the subjects of debate. Large miscellaneous audiences showed by their continued attendance and the attention paid to the speakers how extensive and profound was the interest taken by the public in the questions the Society is formed to examine; and the session closed amid general congratulations upon the success that had attended the past and with excellent auguries for the future.

Having thus briefly sketched what has been done, I will now submit to you what we propose to do.

As will be seen by those present, we have obtained a fit habitation in a convenient locality, most comfortably provided with all appliances for the conduct of our affairs, and with a room for meetings, the only fault of which is the fear that it may not be large enough to accommodate the numbers who, if the last Session be any test, may be expected to attend the meetings, and we should be very reluctant to restrict the present privilege for the admission of visitors.

We have already made gratifying additions to the list of members. Names of world-wide fame have been permitted to grace our roll of honorary members, and already many corresponding members have been volunteered in other countries.

How widely spread is the interest taken in the Society is proved by this: Lying before me are communications from France, from Germany, from New York, from San Francisco, and from Melbourne, expressing the utmost pleasure at the establishment of this Society, and either sending or promising communications of observed phenomena or papers to be read and debated.

The list of papers promised exhibits, not merely an attractive series of subjects, but the names of contributors known to fame, and when these are announced we may fairly anticipate the accession of many more, especially as it will then be apparent that there is no foundation for the report so industriously spread that we had other aims and purposes than those we had professed. It will be seen now that we are *Psychological* in the broadest sense of that term, inviting the cooperation of all sections of Psychologists, whatever their specific creeds, as the Geological Society embraces all classes and creeds of Geology who seek, or may be assumed to seek, the common object of ascertaining what is the very truth.

The Council have had under their consideration an application from many quarters to admit ladies as members. They have come to the conclusion that it is extremely desirable that ladies should attend the meetings of the Society, and the example of other scientific societies has encouraged them to the partial adoption of the proposal. Sufficient reasons were adduced why it would be inexpedient to admit ladies to full membership; but it has been resolved unanimously to issue Ladies' Admission Tickets at half the ordinary subscription (*viz.*, at *one guinea* for the year), which will admit them to all meetings of the Society save such as may be specially excepted and of which due notice will be given.

And now that I am on the subject of subscriptions, I may state that, seeing how small a portion of the present year remains, the Council has resolved that the subscription of all new members shall extend to the close of 1876, and to equalize this to the existing members by reducing their subscription for the next year by one half.

The Council have considered the practicability of providing tea for the members at each meeting, as is done at some other Societies. This, however, the funds of the Society will not permit at present; but should the number of members be largely increased, the plan will be adopted.

An arrangement has been made for procuring and printing reports of the proceedings of the Society, which will be issued periodically.

But there is one subject to which, before I close, I would earnestly invite the attention of the members and indeed of the public.

The basis of all true Science must be *facts*. Science, to be worthy of the name, cannot be spun out of ingenious brains by the mere process of thinking. Nor can it be founded upon a few isolated reports of phenomena. Medical Science has grown out of the collected reports of thousands of cases that have come under the observation of medical

men, and which have been by them reported and afterwards printed and preserved for reference. If Psychology is to make progress and to solve all or any of the mighty problems of Life, Mind, and Soul, it can only be by gathering together a multitude of facts, where they can be readily found by the philosopher and the student and whence they may be cited with some show of authority, to this extent at least, that they have not been accepted without precaution of inquiry into their sources. Already many interesting cases have been communicated to the Society and many more are promised. We invite them from all quarters, as well from those who are not members, as from our members. We stipulate only that they shall be vouched to us, by the person who sends them, as being trustworthy. Names are not required if there be an objection to their publication. As in Medical Reports, initials will suffice, provided that we receive a name and address from the communicant, whose voucher we may venture to accept. The proposed plan is to publish such cases, without note or comment, for common use as *facts* upon which scientific conclusions may be based hereafter, when a large store has been collected and ample material provided for judgment in this as in the other Sciences. In the same treasury of facts and phenomena will also be gathered gradually the many other reported psychological facts and phenomena that are scattered so profusely in medical and other publications, but which are now practically worthless because they cannot be found by the Psychologist when wanted for his researches. This *Psychological Record* will be commenced as soon as our funds permit and it will be issued from time to time as materials are provided. We shall thus be enabled to perform the first and most important of the uses of a scientific society, by inducing communication by observers of important facts which, without some such centre for intelligence, would have been allowed to pass unrecorded.

When opportunity occurs, or permission for investigation is offered, personal examination, under sufficient tests, will be given to any phenomena brought under the notice of the Society, with a view to ascertain the truth and fully and fairly report the result.

Especially do we ask the Medical Men, who have the most frequent and perfect opportunities for witnessing psychological phenomena, to assist our endeavours by transmitting cases that occur in their own practice; not with names, of course, but as they communicate their ordinary medical cases to the medical journals. We should accept such reports on their authority, withholding their own names, if so desired.

As the Society has now a settled habitation, where all communications may be made, information given, and its publications procured, it may not be out of place to suggest that we should begin at once to lay the foundation of a Psychological Library. Nothing of the kind exists at present in the United Kingdom and of its value and utility there cannot be two opinions. But the Society cannot afford to buy. Like all similar Societies, it must look to presentations of books from its Members and those who take an interest in its objects. While, however, a Society is yet in its infancy there is a reasonable objection with many persons to give to it works of value which, if it should not grow to maturity, may be sent to the book-stall. We propose to avoid this objection by asking for *the loan* only, and not the gift, of psychological works. Then, in case of adversity, they would revert to the persons who had presented them. A time, will, I hope, come to us when such loans might safely be converted into gifts to a Society established, and flourishing, and with a future before it.

Having thus briefly reviewed the past short existence of our Society and described the prospects of the Session now to be commenced, I will conclude with an appeal to the

Members to show their zeal for the great enterprise in which they have embarked, not only by regular attendance at the meetings, by contributions of all psychological facts and phenomena that may come under their observation, by occasional papers, and by taking part in the discussions, but also by actively exerting themselves to make the objects and uses of their Society known to their friends and urging them to join it. Members are needed, not for influence only, but to provide the means for efficiently carrying out the objects for which the Society is established. This will be facilitated by the arrangement already stated as to the subscription to be paid by members now joining. I trust, at the close of the session, to be enabled to congratulate you upon still increasing prosperity. I now declare the Second Session of the Society's labours opened.
