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Contributors

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WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE:

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

Stoke Newington Mutual Instruction Society,

BY ITS PRESIDENT,

JONATHAN HUTCHINSON, F.R.S.

OCTOBER, 1883.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY WEST, NEWMAN & CO., HATTON GARDEN.

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WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I received, through your Secretaries, an invitation to become your President, I did not hesitate a moment as to accepting it. The compliment was, indeed, one which was very gratifying to me. I fear I must acknowledge that it is now nearly a quarter of a century since I was present at any of your meetings. It has happened, however, that the chief happiness of my life, during these long years, has had close association with an Essay Society on the one hand, and with Stoke Newington on the other. An invitation in which the two were combined came to me laden with happy memories.

Apart, however, from feelings which were personal, and which, perhaps, I ought scarcely to obtrude upon you, I think that I should have at once recognised, on public grounds, the claim of such a Society as yours to have its requests complied with. The Essay and Discussion Societies of our country, play a very important part in the moulding of its character and the making of its history. Yours has, I believe, been exceptionally successful. Founded by one whose sympathies with social progress were only equalled by his varied attainments in science, and in the midst of a community always remarkable for its zeal in education, it is not surprising that the Stoke Newington Mutual Instruction Society should have had a long and vigorous life, and

that now, at the end of five and thirty years, it should show no signs of age. How useful its career must have been we may in some degree infer from the list of Essays, &c. read before it, which your Committee has recently printed. Your laws have wisely excluded nothing from your debates but "party politics" and "sectarian religion," and various indeed have been the subjects which have been from time to time brought before you for critical examination.

The period during which your Society has been at its work has been by no means uneventful. It is possible indeed that future historians may regard the last half of the nineteenth century as an epoch distinguished alike by vigour of the human intellect, and by what usually goes with it, clearness of the human conscience. We have witnessed in it, I cannot but think, a very real increase in the sense of responsibility of the richer classes for those less favoured. Note, in reference to this, the spread of missionary effort, and its more liberal scope, as an agent of civilisation, as well as of theological teaching. Note the formation of schools, of the best kind, on terms accessible to all; note the wonderful development of cheap and pure literature; and lastly, the giant and very successful effort which has been made to reduce the misery which is caused by intemperance.

In each of these we may with gratitude recognise the formation of a social conscience leading to cheerful self-denial for the good of others, far, I believe, in advance of anything ever before known. If we turn to the achievements of the intellect proper, a picture of the same kind may be sketched. No age, excepting perhaps that of Elizabeth, has possessed at once such poets as Tennyson and Browning, such prose writers as Carlyle and George Eliot. In every department of Science splendid progress has also been made. Without the least fear of contradiction from any who understand the

subject, I may assert that Darwin's discoveries and reasonings have had for their results modifications of thought the importance of which to man's progress it is impossible as yet to calculate, and for which we might fail to find a parallel in the history of our race.

Permit me for a few moments to enquire as to what may have been the special function of our Society in the midst of all this vigour of intellectual activity? I think we may say of it, as of a multitude of others having like objects, that its work has rather been in the development of opinion, and the correction of error, than in the collection of new facts. Familiarity with the knowledge already in our possession, what may be called expressively *book-knowledge*, is to be obtained at schools, or in college-classes or from private reading, and the task of making fresh additions to its stock is undertaken by various special Societies, each of which restricts itself, more or less closely, to its own class of facts. None of our Scientific Societies make any attempt to go beyond their particular scope, or to do more than to collect and sift special facts. The vocation of literature and of Literary Societies is, however, much wider. It deals with the mutual relationships of different groups of acknowledged facts, and especially with their application to the formation of opinion and the enlargement of the grasp of the mind. Do I make a too ambitious assertion if I say that the main function of a Debating and Literary Society is *to develop knowledge into wisdom?* It is only by very slow degrees that the social opinions which constitute popular wisdom are formed, and when once formed it is by still slower ones that they are changed. They are based, speaking broadly, upon the sum of the nation's knowledge, and they have been developed, elaborated, and corrected by constant discussion. In this work daily conversation takes the largest share; the reading of newspapers, journals, and books comes

next; but the public and systematised form of discourse which we name *debate* is not far behind them in value. Not unfrequently Societies like ours add the word Philosophical to their designation, thus openly professing to be founded for the cultivation of *wisdom*. A *Literary and Philosophical Society* is a common form of designation, but one, I would submit, open to some criticism as verging on tautology, since, if we consider it well, the final end of all sound literature is the pursuit of wisdom. It is the business of literature to build for wisdom a house in which to live, to give it a body in which to walk abroad, clothes for its protection, and fitting adornments for its natural grace. It is a means to an end, and has in itself no final aim. It is possible that I may seem, to some, to use the word wisdom in a lower sense than that to which they have been accustomed. It is one of those words which come to us so surrounded as it were by preternatural halo, that we are apt to forget how simple and familiar are the things which they designate. This mistake is often a source of hindrance to us. We approach the contemplation of wisdom with an awe which enfeebles our knees and wraps our heads in cloud. We forget that, after all, this faculty, so sublime in its higher development, is one which is in degree universal, which the sage shares with the peasant, the elephant and the dog with the timid rabbit and the silly sheep. Especially, I think, do we make mistakes as to the sources of wisdom,—its genesis,—and in particular its relationship to what we call knowledge. Two of our most prized modern poets have, indeed, stated their creed on this point with remarkable emphasis. In each instance that creed is, I must contend, to a large extent an error. I refer to Cowper and Tennyson, and in each instance I do not doubt that the passage in question is well known to most of those whom I address.

I shrink from the attempt to give a definition of

wisdom, and yet for the purposes of our argument it is absolutely necessary in some manner to do so. Let it be suggested, then, that wisdom is that quality, or attribute, or attainment of the individual, which fits him for living well, and enables him to secure for himself and others, now and hereafter, the greatest amount of happiness which human life affords. It is a quality or attribute of the mind, not a something superadded to it. We can speak of wisdom in the abstract as we speak of sweetness, but not as we speak of sugar. If a man makes himself wise, in so doing he alters his mental constitution and becomes throughout his nature something different from what he was; he does not simply receive an addition. I can ask for sugar in my coffee in small or large quantity, or for its omission, and get it more or less according to my taste, but it is not so with wisdom. It, like the aroma of the coffee, is an essential quality of the thing itself, and can be increased only under the original conditions which gave birth to that thing. As the sun and rain to the growth and ripening of the coffee-berry, so are familiarity with Nature, and free intercourse with men, to the formation and ripening of wisdom.

It is necessary to clear our way by attempts at the definition of one or two other words. What is *knowledge?* what is *science?* what is *understanding?* By knowledge we will mean, if you please, the seeing of the truth—seeing, I mean, not so much with the outward as with the mental eye—the perception of the real facts as to things past and present, and the power to record and remember them. It is obvious that knowledge may be partial, limited, one-sided, and that the perception of one truth may be so mixed up with, and thwarted by, ignorance of another, that the resulting opinion may come to partake most of the latter element. Hence many mistakes result, and superficial observers may lay

upon knowledge the blame really due to its absence. Let us carefully guard against such blunders. *Science* is simply another name for knowledge, — the Latin name,—but it has come to be applied frequently to special branches of knowledge in which exactitude is desirable and possible. By *understanding* we mean the mind's power of appreciating knowledge, of distinguishing between the true and the false. The power of acquiring knowledge is, obviously, always in relation to the vigour of the understanding.

I hope that I yield to few in my reverence for all true Poets, and in my love for the two whose opinions, as to the relations between knowledge and wisdom, I am now about to bring under your notice, and not without some criticism. I trust that I love Plato, but I love truth more, and believing that both Cowper and Tennyson are in the wrong I am bound to say so. I would willingly have avoided an ungracious task, and at the same time the risk of failure in it, but that I feel sure that the error I shall try to expose is a very wide-spread and a very injurious one. It is one, too, which seems to have gained in force, if it has not even originated, in these latter days. A distrust of knowledge has sprung up amongst us, and a desire to exalt wisdom as if it were a something independent and almost antagonistic. I might quote largely from our modern sentimental moralists in proof that they have often written in oblique praise of ignorance. Thus we find George Herbert, tender, witty, and often wise as he was, writing "A handful of good works is worth a bushel of knowledge." As well might he have said that a peck of apples is worth an orchard of apple trees. Again, "Knowledge is folly except grace guide it"; true enough, but is not grace the crowning flower of the knowledge of good things? Show me the grace which is the offspring of stupidity or ignorance.

Cowper's poetry is full of disparagement of what he would call "human" knowledge. I will make, for our present purpose, but one quotation. It is from the 'Winter Walk at Noon':—

> "Knowledge and Wisdom, far from being one,
> Have ofttimes no connexion. Knowledge dwells
> In heads replete with thoughts of other men;
> Wisdom in minds attentive to their own."

I make bold to suggest that wisdom and knowledge have invariably the direct connexion of cause and effect, and that wisdom is simply the ripe fruit of the tree of knowledge. As a minor point, further, it is surely not true that knowledge is always obtained second-hand, nor that all wisdom is self-originated. The seeker after wisdom of the highest kind will often, perhaps usually, attain his object much quicker by the aid of a friend or of a book, than by solitary introspection. The latter process profits only those whose minds are already well stored with facts. If it were not so, where would be the value of education? Let me illustrate my meaning:—A kitten catching flies is guilty of the unwisdom of seizing a wasp, and gets stung in the mouth. Had it known that flies were indigestible, it would have abstained from catching them; had it known that wasps could sting, it would have shunned most carefully the still greater error of treating them as if they were flies. Defining wisdom to be the state of mind which prompts to the line of conduct most certain to secure happiness, we have here a good example in proof that it has its root in the knowledge of facts. I give you here an instance of negative wisdom, or wisdom in avoidance of ill, but exactly the same argument will hold good as to wisdom in activity. We cannot judge between the causes of rejoicing and the causes of suffering, choose the good and avoid the evil, unless we know how to discriminate them.

Yet in spite of the criticisms which I have ventured, and which are probably obvious to most, there is a semblance of truth about what Cowper has written, and our minds revert to an impression that after all he was to a large extent right. Surely, it will be argued, we do not find the ability to live well and wisely always in proportion to the amount of instruction received, or to the familiarity of the mind with facts. This is certainly so, and nothing can be more true than that knowledge does not, immediately and directly, constitute wisdom. It must be developed, elaborated, become organised as it were, before it can assume the higher character. It was cleverly said of some one that "he had a great appetite for knowledge, but a very poor digestion," and of such a man it would certainly be true that he might load his mind with facts, but could never advance much in wisdom.

I just now claimed for our Society that its chief function was to help in the digestion of knowledge and its development into wisdom, and it was this assertion which led me into the present disquisition. This development, let us never forget, is necessarily very slow. All good things are, as the Greek has told us, hard; and can we expect that this, the greatest good of all, should be found an easy or a rapid process? The life-time of an individual counts for but little in the elaboration of wisdom, and, for the most part, what we name as such has been the heirloom of many, very many generations. Not the less did it take its beginning, and receive its increments, from the acquisition of knowledge. It has been said that it takes three generations to breed a gentleman, and at least three to acquire the gout, but the growth of wisdom is far slower. In proof of this let us remember the remarkable sameness, as regards this quality, through many successive generations of the same races. As far as wisdom is concerned the

Celt remains a Celt, the Jew a Jew, and the Negro a Negro, through the longest periods of historic time. There is progress, I doubt not, but it is in most races, and in most times, so slow as to be almost imperceptible.

The quotation which I have made from Cowper's Task is completed by the following lines :—

> "Knowledge, a rude unprofitable mass,
> The mere materials with which wisdom builds,
> Till smoothed and squared and fitted to its place,
> Does but encumber whom it seems to enrich.
> Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much ;
> Wisdom is humble that he knows no more."

Is it not the fact that in these plausible statements the poet is merely applying the term wisdom to old knowledge, and drawing such distinction as might well be made between an apple just formed in August, and the same fruit when ripe in October? Knowledge forms the materials not with which wisdom builds, but out of which wisdom grows. The bricks ranged in ungainly heaps, fresh from the kiln, may be compared to knowledge; the same bricks when built into a house for protection, comfort, and ornament, may be compared to wisdom, the artificer being the understanding. Bricks and a house are not the same thing, but we cannot have the house without the bricks.

I will next read you a quotation from Tennyson :—

> "Who loves not knowledge? Who shall rail
> Against her beauty? May she mix
> With men and prosper. Who shall fix
> Her pillars? Let her work prevail.
>
> But on her forehead sits a fire:
> She sets her forward countenance
> And leaps into the future chance,
> Submitting all things to desire.

Half-grown as yet, a child, and vain—
She cannot fight the fear of death.
What is she, cut from love and faith,
But some wild Pallas from the brain

Of Demons? fiery-hot to burst
All barriers in her onward race
For power. Let her know her place;
She is the second, not the first.

A higher hand must make her mild,
If all be not in vain; and guide
Her footsteps, moving side by side
With wisdom, like the younger child:

For she is earthly of the mind,
But Wisdom heavenly of the soul."

* * * *

It is impossible to read these grand lines without admiration and without sympathy with their general drift. Yet they are, I cannot but think, false in their metaphysics, and untrustworthy in their teaching. Is it possible to cut love and faith away from knowledge and to find them a basis on its absence? A knowledge or perception of the true and the beautiful is surely the only foundation for reasonable love. In truth, so inseparably are these connected, that love might almost be described as being the sentiment produced by the perception of beauty. If faith is to be anything more than the merest superstition, it must find its basis somewhere in knowledge. From what we know as to the past and the present we infer as to the future, and this inference we call faith. In proportion as we can trust our knowledge is our faith strong or weak. It is obviously impossible for anyone who knows himself wholly ignorant of the future, to feel any strong faith respecting it.

Again, when our poet denies that knowledge can fight the fear of death, I cannot but think that he is mistaken.

I am aware that I am approaching a very serious subject, but must yet ask to be allowed to say a few words upon it, for it is one which is far too often avoided.

The dread of the cessation of existence, the loss of the personal consciousness which we term our life, is so deep-rooted in all, so absolutely instinctive, that its conquest may be well regarded as a test of the value of any mental acquirement. Tennyson, in the lines which I have quoted, records his conviction that this conquest cannot be made by knowledge. The dread of death is felt, let us note, in full intensity, by all animals, and it is the source of almost all the conditions which we mean by the term terror. Perhaps it might be safe to assert, within certain limits and with exceptions here and there, that this dread diminishes with education and becomes less abject as we advance in civilisation. Bacon, in his remarkable Essay on this subject, reminds us how easily it is overcome by many of the emotions and passions, asserting that "there is no passion in the mind of man so weak but it mates and masters the fear of death." He further remarks that "revenge triumphs over death, love slights it, honour aspireth to it, and grief flies to it." He would appear to have himself entertained remarkably little of this fear, which he speaks of as "weak," reminding us that "it is as natural to die as to be born." Finally he assures us that to a mind "fixed and bent upon somewhat that is good" "the dolours of death are averted," and in very remarkable words adds, "but, above all, believe it, the sweetest canticle is, 'Nunc dimittis,' when a man hath obtained worthy ends and expectations."

Shakespeare, as we all know, makes the dread of death to consist in our ignorance of the hereafter, "the undiscovered country." Let us keep a clear distinction between reluctance to die and fear of death. The one is a healthy sentiment which it is not to be desired that

knowledge, or any other acquisition, should ever displace. Under all ordinary conditions of health and happiness we joyfully acknowledge the duty of delight in life, and we carefully seek to cherish a feeling of unwillingness to end prematurely our association with the beautiful world into which we have been born. The fear of death is something quite different from the cessation of zest for life, and it is as to the effect of increase of knowledge upon this fear that we have to enquire. Let us remark in passing that if advance in true knowledge cannot help us, it is yet quite certain that suppositious knowledge can. The Mahommedan believes that he knows that there is for him a secure abode of bliss after death, and this creed, which is to him the equivalent of knowledge, entirely overcomes all dread of the change. It were strange, and most pitiable, if true knowledge in this matter were less comforting than that which we believe to be a mistake. Let us try to see how the matter stands, or rather let me briefly glance at one or two topics in connexion with it, for there are some of great importance to which it would not be fitting that I should even allude on the present occasion.

Is it not the fact that our conceptions as to the order of the universe, and the nature of the great Spirit in whom we live, and move, and have our being, have, from primitive times onwards to the present, been purified, dignified, and exalted? I refer not only to times of paganism, but those of Roman Christianity, and to yet more recent times. One by one superstitions more or less gross have become impossible and been put aside, and love and trust have year by year found firmer ground in the belief that there is neither variableness nor shadow of turning in that glorious order of things in which we are called to play our part. In that order Death, the cessation of individual existence and the transference of life and life's duties to others, is an essential part. To this pro-

gress in opinion the study of history and of science have been mainly contributory. They have further shewn, in the most conclusive manner, that death is really no interruption to life, but almost synonymous with its renewal. Although personality or individualism be but temporary, life, we begin to perceive, is permanent and immortal. The grand old Hebrew metaphors come over us with gain, both in beauty and truth, from our familiarity with modern knowledge. We all do fade as do the leaves, but we are renewed as are the leaves, and no single leaf, however short its life, but has contributed its share to the glory of the tree. Amongst the foremost of the results of modern science in its strictest sense (of examination into the laws of heat, electricity, and the like), is the perception of the indestructibility of all forms of force. The famous line which Shelley applied to the cloud, so fleeting in form, yet so immortal in being,

"I change, but I cannot die,"

is found to be literally true of all nature, not only of the physical world but also of the moral. I cannot but believe that all who gain a perception of this doctrine, secure for themselves a great increase of trust and comfort in life. It becomes possible in this creed to lead quiet, hopeful, unfevered lives. If we be but true there is no need for hurry, the forces of nature are all with us, and however brief the lives of individual men, "Man has for-ever." Working in this spirit, each life, long or short, is complete in itself, and every year, every week, every day, is sure of its result. It is as impossible that anything can be lost, as that any atom of matter can be destroyed. I claim that these sentiments are the legitimate offspring of modern knowledge, and I cannot but think that it is possible for the mind which is imbued with them to attain to something very near to victory over the fear of Death.

The sense of continuity becomes the perception of immortality.

The distrust of knowledge in reference to moral gain, and the belief that it is possible to attain to wisdom without its aid, which we have noted, are, I think, mainly of modern growth. The wise Hebrew King, in those beautiful chapters which introduce the book of Proverbs, makes no such distinction, and is as warm in the praise of knowledge as he is of wisdom, treating them almost as if they were the same thing, or at any rate as if the one were the means to the other.

"To know wisdom and *instruction;* to perceive the words of understanding."

"To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man *knowledge* and discretion."

"A wise man will hear, and will increase *learning*." "Fools despise wisdom and *instruction*."

"How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate *knowledge*?"

"Yea, if thou criest after *knowledge*, and liftest up thy voice for understanding."

"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth *understanding*."

Everywhere the fool (i. e. the non-wise) is spoken of as a despiser of knowledge.

Bacon's eloquent praise of knowledge is known to everyone. He clearly had no misgiving. It is the same with Shakespeare; and although he puts the words as a kind of chance expression into the mouth of a Jester, I suspect that he summed up his own belief when he declared, "there is no darkness but ignorance."

Let me also remind you of a line of Young's, often quoted but possibly more praised than pondered.

"The undevout astronomer is mad."

Let us analyse this line and see to what conclusions it will lead us. To be mad is to have the mind in such a

condition that it fails in an egregious manner to perceive the true relations of the facts which it knows. An astronomer is one possessing a good knowledge of the facts as regards the countless worlds which occupy space. To be "undevout" is to be without sense of devotion to the maker of all things, the Spirit of the universe,—to feel as if personal and self-existent, and owing no reverence to the unseen. It is clear, then, that in Young's opinion the natural result of physical knowledge in this department is gain to the devotional or reverential spirit. I cannot doubt for a moment that he is right, and will assert further that the revelations of the telescope do not differ in their tendency in this respect from those of the microscope or the scalpel. Advance in physical knowledge may rid us of superstitions, but will never do otherwise than help true faith and tend to devotedness of life.

In what respect, let us ask, is it correct to speak of knowledge as a "child," "half-grown"; in relation to wisdom, "a younger child"? Simply, so far as I can see, in this, that we have, always extant, a certain amount of newly-gained knowledge as yet unapplied and immature. This must always be the case, and if we choose to call old and ripened knowledge by the name of wisdom, then the expressions I have quoted in reference to that which is young will become appropriate. Not the less, however, does it remain the fact that in the first, and in every successive stage, the acquisition of knowledge preceded the formation of wisdom. Knowledge may in some sense be said to be the perception of truth in fragments, whilst wisdom takes cognisance of it as a whole; or possibly we sometimes use the words as if knowledge meant the perception of truth in minor matters, and wisdom in those of first importance. Such definitions are, however, clearly only conventional, and make no reference to the real relationships of the two. In a far deeper

sense we might say of wisdom that it is human instinct applied to the conduct of life. This would lead us to ask how instincts arise. Granted that they are seemingly intuitive in the individual, being born with him, and transmitted by him to his children, we shall yet be obliged to admit that in his remote predecessors they began in the acquisition of knowledge. They are the crystallised sum of knowledge; they are knowledge ingrained by hereditary transmission. They bear perhaps in extreme instances almost the same relation to young knowledge that the diamond does to carbon. Yet, although so different, there is still the relationship of parent and child. The bird did not learn to build its nest, nor the bee to form its comb, all at a jump. In each case there were at first trials and partial failures, then finally success and a habit formed which became capable of hereditary transmission. Such, I believe, are the opinions of all who have, in the light of modern facts, examined the facts as to instinct in the lower animals. Precisely the same reasoning is doubtless applicable to those higher instincts in man which we name morality and wisdom.

I am aware that to some it will appear to be an objection to my argument that we do not always find the possessors of knowledge capable of nobleness of life. Is there not, it will be asked, after all ,a faculty distinct from knowledge, and superior to it, which fits its possessor for self-denial in the path of duty? We must not confuse knowledge or even wisdom with conscientiousness or strength of will. These depend upon other conditions of mental organisation, and may unquestionably be present in high degree without any recent additions of knowledge. They, like wisdom, are matters of organisation and of hereditary transmission. We may define conscientiousness as the sense of responsibility for doing what we believe to be right, and this sense unquestionably

varies much in different persons. Given, however, two individuals in whom conscience and will are equally strong, it is clear that the advantage would rest with him who had wisdom and knowledge in addition. As a matter of fact, indeed, conscientiousness without knowledge and wisdom is often a most inconvenient feature of human character, and so also is strength of will. What we want is to develope sense of responsibility side by side with the development of knowledge.

It is time that I should conclude. If I have troubled you too far with definitions and explanations, I must remind you that my motive has been good. I have been aiming all the time to strengthen the hands of your Secretaries and those who take the chief share in the work of your Society. I have been trying to convince all of the great value of your meetings as a means of advancing that greatest of all life's aims, the increase of Wisdom. Rest assured that you will gain this result. Never distrust knowledge, for it is the only path to the desired goal. Be fearless in its pursuit, and let your fearlessness be the result of sound faith. Keep aside, according to your excellent rule, *Sectarian* religion and *Party* politics, for they lead to quarrels; but with these exceptions debate boldly on everything else. Try to look at all sides of things, and know that this is the only way to truth. There is no road to wisdom but through knowledge, therefore let us love knowledge.

I purposely omitted in their place the lines with which Tennyson concludes. Let me now give them.

* * * *

"O, friend, who camest to thy goal
So early, leaving me behind,

I would the great world grew like thee,
Who grewest not alone in power
And knowledge, but by year and hour
In reverence and in charity."

As we all know, 'In Memoriam' was addressed to the memory of a buried friend. Concerning this friend the poet had no misgiving as to increase of Knowledge having led in him to increase in Wisdom and in Love. What was wanted was the faith to believe that this was the natural and universal result. We are all of us apt to think that what we call the "world," at a distance from us, proceeds on different lines from those attained to by ourselves and our immediate friends. Let us seek more faith, and try to realise that this impression, so universal but so illusory, proceeds only from want of strength in the power of realising what we do not see. Could we see clearly we should know that the tendency of the human spirit is as constantly and inevitably upwards as that of trees. All forms of life seek the sun and the light. Let us thankfully trust the "Great World."