For Idea and Reality.

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Philosophy and Sound Human Understanding.

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[385] It is still only a little over thirty years since J. L. Heiberg found himself called upon in our literature to speak up for a more thoroughgoing philosophical thinking and to remind us emphatically how far we in this respect stood behind other civilized nations, since philosophy was still only a foreign guest in this country, scarcely even a welcome one. "It has", he says, "already often been remarked that while we Danes appropriate the general European culture in its many different directions, there is yet one left, by which we have so far not let ourselves be led, namely the philosophical. The political, the scientific, the aesthetic and the religious life bear among us the general stamp of the present; from all those quarters the beneficent wind of culture blows upon our little Denmark, which does not merely follow the prevailing current of air, but also many a time uses sail and rudder to modify its course, to make use of the mighty element without letting itself be mastered by it. But while we willingly let ourselves be blown through by the *spirit* which, according to the Nordic fable, comes *[386]* from the four dwarfs in the corners of the world out of Ymir's enormous skull, we are on the other hand afraid of catching cold from the universal *Spirit*, and cautiously creep into our snail-shell whenever we detect its presence" (Perseus. No. 1. 1837).

Much water has run into the shore since that time. The constitution of the realm, the thoughts of the people, the appearance of literature, the direction of the spiritual life, everything has in the interval of a few years undergone such a change that the old and the new already stand like two disputants each insisting on being right, who watch one another suspiciously, measure one another with their eyes, and even where there is good will on both sides, have difficulty enough in understanding one another. Under the strong movements in the outward the gaze has at the same time been turned toward the inward; a growing need for spiritual self-reflection manifests itself, though in different ways, in ever wider circles. Thus philosophy among us is no longer a superfluous luxury, an imported ornamental plant that can only thrive in a hothouse heated for the purpose, but an unavoidable necessity, a demand of the spirit, that we must in our circumstances see to satisfying as well as we can.

For what is philosophy? A scientific doctrine of consciousness, a science that wants to clear up what it is that we call our self, and to help the thinking human being to orient himself in his own consciousness. All kinds of delusions and illusions of the senses, disappointments and self-deceptions of every sort have, humanly speaking,

their root in ignorance of the fundamental laws of the self-conscious life. To ride astray in one's own forest is dangerous, though in a certain sense lordly, insofar as it presupposes that the forest, and with it the estate, must have a wide extent; but *[387]* to run astray in one's own consciousness and to ask like the peasant: "was it I who was here before?" is lamentable, and the more so in proportion as the individual natural gifts are considerable and the spiritual possessions, knowledge, experiences, etc., extensive. There is therefore, as one sees, something in philosophy that concerns everyone. No one can think about his life without philosophizing; reality, the daily life with its circumstances and unforeseen accidents, has problems enough: Jeppe in the Baron's bed is surely close to being choked by problems.

Against the national endeavors of the present time people have now and then wished to set up the old proposition that truth is the same for all, that national differences must not exert any influence on the sciences, that philosophy in particular, the universal science, must be cosmopolitan. Insofar as what is still thought of here is the pure laws of thinking, the proposition certainly has its validity. But when the question is about the peculiar treatment of scientific tasks and about the presentation of the content of science as conditioned by the vernaculars, nationality asserts its right. The more original scientific productions are, and the more the investigations approach what is innermost in the spiritual, the more strongly will the theory of cognition, and with it the whole literature, be stamped by the national spirit. That philosophy, the cosmopolitan science, can by no means be served by being torn up from the national soil and floating freely in the airy regions of universal thoughts, its own history teaches. The philosophy of the Greeks is a reflection of the Greek spirit, and it is by no means accidental that philosophy at present has a quite different *[388]* character in Germany than, e.g., in England.

If then it is true, as is so often repeated, that it is the clear sound understanding, united with a certain profundity, but at the same time with a decided aversion to mystical speculations and idle brooding, that is to furnish the measure of the intellectual endowment of the Danish people — a way of looking at things which finds confirmation in the fact that Holberg, "the founder of our literature, he whose incalculable influence on our taste and our natural judgment has made itself felt in almost all directions", is precisely one of the most brilliant representatives of the Sound Human Understanding — if this, we say, is the case: then there must also be demonstrable a philosophical task corresponding especially to this direction of spirit.

The task is: *to determine the limits of human* knowledge.

The first decisive condition for attaining scientific insight is that at every step I must distinguish precisely between what I know and what I do not know. My progress in knowledge depends on this: that there is much that I do not yet know, but which I may perhaps in time come to know. In human knowledge there are on all sides countless limits that can be overstepped. By new discoveries, new points of view, new methods, science makes ceaseless progress, oversteps the old limits in all directions, and in this sense it will be impossible to predict how far it may reach in the course of
[389] the ages. But the question, the decisive question of limits for life and science, on which we here in the name of the Sound Human Understanding must lay stress, is quite another. The fundamental question is whether philosophy in the form of knowledge is able to solve the riddles of existence.

Among the riddles of life there are chiefly two, on whose significance the Sound Human Understanding has always laid particular stress, and for whose solution it would certainly be infinitely obliged to philosophy as a science; these are, as is well known, the reality of God's existence and the immortality of the soul, for which it seeks confirmation. Has philosophy been in a position to give such a confirmation? No! Why not? Because the last, decisive answer to the questions belonging here lies outside the limit of human knowledge. That the many proofs set up hitherto, by which people have sought to ground those truths, comforting to humanity, can be dissolved into just as many doubts, negative criticism has sufficiently demonstrated. By attacking the proofs of the supposed truths one has then gone to the opposite extreme; one has accordingly, from the standpoint of modern consciousness, set up proofs before whose "inexorable logic" both God and immortality must vanish. God, the almighty willing self, does not exist; an almighty, willing being is a conceptless concept, an imagination of faith, a soap bubble that bursts when it is touched by the needle-point of criticism: God's existence is, like the existence of the round square, impossible. In a similar way one proves that the immortality of the soul is impossible. The life of the soul is originally conditioned by bodily organs; to think without a brain
[390] is as impossible as to feel without nerves. Thus: when the nerves die, the feeling dies too, when the body dies, the soul dies too.

But what does the Sound Human Understanding say? It says that philosophy is presumptuous when it gives itself the appearance of knowing what no human being can know. The sound understanding takes sides just as little with the knowledge that deposes as with that which installs God; just as little with that which disproves as with that which proves the immortality of the soul. The sound understanding

is, as regards the highest truths, a great skeptic; with its grounds for and against it never gets beyond doubt. But this insuperable doubting of the understanding contains precisely a presupposition which the understanding itself must regard as raised above every doubt, the presupposition that there is in reality something that we in this present life shall never get to know, that human knowledge, in other words, has an insuperable limit.

There are many propositions that look reasonable as long as they are kept in generalities; and yet, when something definite is spoken of, and it is a question of a real application, it may suddenly turn out that the propositions acceptable at first glance contain a hidden ambiguity and give a false meaning. To this belong the general propositions of abstract philosophy about the limits of human knowledge. If there were, one will say, something altogether inaccessible to knowledge, then there would have to be, in our own inner life as well as in the world of things, something altogether inaccessible to thought, something so enigmatic that it withdrew from all our comprehension, because it withdrew from all the laws of nature as well as of thought. But such a mysterious, in itself unthinkable being is a veritable non- *[391]*
being. How dangerous it is to surrender oneself to unclear representations of a mystical being whose inexplicable activity is not bound to any thinkable law, whose revelations mock all concepts of the connection of things by conditioned causes and corresponding effects, can be seen from the incessant struggle of reason with superstition[1)]. In China, e.g., where a rational conception of visible things and their connection has after all been attained to the point that for everyday needs one is tolerably at home in astronomy, the almanac expressly shows what a Chinese must suffer every day throughout the year from secret dread of the enigmatic play of chance; wise prescriptions are necessary. A Chinese calendar, beginning with the 8th of February, the Chinese New Year's Day, prescribes: "On the First you may make your religious offerings (of fowls as well as fish); you may address yourself to Heaven (in thanksgivings, prayers, vows — by burning gilt paper, straw figures or fireworks in endless variety); you may dress in gala, with a fur cap or an elegant waist-band.… On the Fifth you must not begin a journey.… The Eighth is doubtful.… On the Tenth you may enter into marriage.… On the Thirteenth you must at five o'clock in the morning sit with your face turned to the southeast". Without failing to recognize the great superiority of European culture over the Chinese, one can nevertheless, when one considers properly how dangerous it still is in our enlightened age to be

[1)] The essence of superstition is to assume causes without laws.

thirteen at table, to lay two knives crosswise, to pick up a pin on a Monday, to begin
[392] something on a Friday, etc., with justice maintain that in the midst of the civilized world there are still not so very few who, with a shy glance at the door of chance, which always stands ajar, harbor a Chinese dread of the whimsical interference of secret powers in the connection of things.

If the race is ever to get so far that it finally gets the better of all this superstitious fear and is rid of all these anxieties, these uncanny forebodings: then it must gradually learn to free itself from mystical representations of insoluble riddles. But what does this mean, other than that the light of thought in consciousness must at last become so clear that all things in the world show themselves as necessary revelations of the eternal reason. The reason in the world and the reason in man are one and the same being; man's knowledge of things corresponds exactly to his knowledge of himself. If it is unthinkable that anything can exist which, by its nature, falls outside the limit of reason, then it is given thereby that there cannot possibly be anything either on earth or in heaven or in the abysses which by its nature falls outside the limit of human knowledge.

With the view here set up all goes excellently as long as one, as has been said, moves within the circumference of general considerations. By incessantly appealing to reason and the laws, the unchangeable laws of thought and of things, one can even give the matter the appearance that the strict, investigating sciences, physics, chemistry, physiology, natural history, etc., were all uniting with philosophy to confirm the principle that human knowledge has no last, final limit. But if on the
[393] other hand we take the matter as it is in reality, then something else shows itself. For then it shows itself that the principle of the absolute limit of human knowledge by no means stands in conflict with the principle of the unchangeableness of the laws; then it shows itself that the natural sciences, far from denying the sharply marked limit of knowledge, on the contrary, all for one and one for all, presuppose it and maintain it in force.

If we reflect on how it actually came about that the natural sciences in more recent times have been able to take so mighty an upswing and attain such great remarkable results, the ground of this is well enough known, for it lies in the method. The method, the right procedure, is determined precisely by this, that one makes clear to oneself right from the beginning what can be investigated under given conditions and what lies outside investigation, what can be known and what cannot be known. As long as the boundary between what can be known and what cannot be known was still

fluctuating and indeterminate, as in antiquity and throughout the whole Middle Ages, so long also the course of the investigations was wavering, and the yield uncertain; astrology, alchemy, brooding over the philosopher's stone, such mystical and magical endeavors show plainly enough how unclear consciousness was about the limits and tasks of science.

It is truly remarkable to see the sharpness with which the strict sciences separate that which lies outside knowledge from that which can and must become the object of scientific investigation. "The aim of mechanics", it is said, "is to fathom the general *[394]* laws of the equilibrium of the mechanical forces of nature and of the motions of the masses, whereby a perfect order and harmony is maintained in the phenomena of the corporeal world". One would now think that the hidden essence of the mechanical forces would have to be cleared up from the ground up in analytical mechanics; but here the express declaration is given *that we do not know what force is.* "When a body" — with these words Laplace begins his "Mechanics of the Heavens" — "changes its position in relation to a system of bodies which we regard as at rest, then it seems to us to move"; and he adds: "the nature of the peculiar property which makes a body pass from one place to another is, and will always remain, unknown; it has been designated by the name force, but one can only determine its effects and the laws according to which it acts". A similar indication of the limit of knowledge we meet in chemical physics, e.g. in the doctrine of heat. "The sense of feeling is able, in bodies, to distinguish between different states, which are expressed by the words: *hot*, *warm*, *cold*, etc. When a body which one calls cold becomes warm or hot, its volume grows, it expands. The *unknown cause,* which brings about the expansion of bodies, and which at the same time produces the various impressions mentioned on our feeling, one calls heat". Thus: we do not know what heat is; neither do we know what magnetism is, we do not know what electricity is; we do not know what the cause of a chemical attraction is; in short: there is laid down in the foundation of all doctrinal edifices of natural science an acknowledgment that human knowledge has an insuperable limit. *[395]* Herewith the exact sciences have admitted without circumlocution that existence, despite the natural connection of things, has its riddles; and yet there is hardly anyone who will maintain that the presupposed limit of knowledge will instill in human beings a secret dread of the obscure powers of nature, or bring any living soul to prepare himself for unknown possibilities by sitting "on the Thirteenth at five o'clock in the morning with his face turned to the southeast".

If we consider the relation between soul and body, then no one can doubt that it is

determined in all respects by laws; none the less the investigations must begin from two altogether different points of departure. If the point of departure is chosen in the soul, we get psychology; if it is chosen in the body, we get physiology. Psychology keeps to the inner experiences, to our immediate consciousness of feeling, imagination, memory, understanding, impulse, will, etc. Physiology keeps to the outer experiences, it regards the human body like any other body, examines its organs and tissues, its inner structure and composition, partly from a mechanical, partly from a chemical, partly from a morphological standpoint.

Now it is indeed the case that the investigation of the inward life of the soul constantly presupposes regard to the bodily, and that conversely the interpretation of the bodily formations is conditioned by regard to the functions of the soul; how would it be possible for the psychologist to form any concept of the activity of sight without knowledge of the eye, or for the physiologist to interpret the structure of the
[396] eye without regard to the activity of sight? Psychology and physiology must come to meet each other; they must diligently confer and correspond with one another.

Nevertheless the two sciences are of so dissimilar a character that the one forms a part of philosophy, the other of physics. There is no direct transition from the one to the other: the transition occurs by a leap. Feeling and sensory nerve are most intimately united; but from the physiological analysis of a sensory nerve to the psychological cognition of a feeling, what an immense distance! The object of outward experience is absolutely dissimilar to the object of inward experience. However long physiology and psychology continue their investigations, and however much they may in the course of time approach one another, there will never come the time when they fully understand one another. Each speaks its own language, and the two languages are so immeasurably different that what is said in the one cannot by any translation be rendered in the other. It is as though the law and the riddle had here made an appointment to meet each other; the law can be known, but the riddle is insoluble. When a sensory nerve is cut, the part of the body concerned loses all feeling; this is a law which physiology has discovered, and of which it can make a rich application; but thereby it has not come a hair's breadth nearer to answering the question how the nerve transmits the feeling. And what likeness is there then between convolutions of the brain, organs of the brain, the white and the gray matter, and the life of consciousness of thoughts and representations which, under the supervision of a governing self, works in the brain?

[397] It is altogether impossible either that a brain activity should be able to produce a

thought, or that a thought activity should cause a movement in the brain, if there is not an inner common nature in which the two are united. Such a nature must be bodily like the brain and spiritual like the thought; but such a nature is neither an object of thinking nor of sense-perception; it withdraws from every possible investigation: it lies outside the limit of human knowledge.

And yet there must be such a nature; we know it with certainty: we can prove it psychologically. If in the brain activity there were nothing but what we can imagine by means of physiological observation: then a brain activity could not possibly produce a thought. The physiological activity is, whether it is apprehended from the mechanical or chemical or morphological side, bodily, solely and only bodily. That an activity in a bodily part can produce changes in another bodily part, we can well understand, for here the cause is of the same kind as the effect; but that an activity in the merely bodily can produce a change in the altogether non-bodily is a contradiction, for here the cause is absolutely dissimilar to the effect. How one thought can produce another thought, the thought of ground, e.g., the thought of consequence, the thought of purpose the thought of means, is obvious, for here the producing is of the same kind as that which is produced; but that thought, a non-bodily cause, should be able to produce in the brain a bodily effect, is unthinkable, for the cause is again dissimilar, absolutely dissimilar to the effect.

But, one objects, if we know that the connection between soul and body must *[398]* absolutely rest on a nature common to both, a fundamental nature in which the dissimilar is similar, then we know that such a nature exists, and can therefore not without contradiction maintain that its being falls outside our knowledge. The sophistry of such an objection is obvious. When we say that there is here something that lies outside our knowledge, we say quite correctly that we have a knowledge that such a something is, but we also say that we cannot get beyond this general knowledge and determine the unknown more closely; herewith the limit is fixed.

The soul's law-governed connection with the body is thus a riddle of life. Simple as this proposition is, it has nevertheless, as the Sound Human Understanding will readily see, extremely important consequences. The consequences show themselves at once when the talk is of the separation of soul and body, of death; for it goes without saying: as the connection is, so must the separation be too. The relation between the law and the riddle becomes visible again.

It is a law, as decisive for psychology as for physiology, that when the organs of thinking are disturbed, thinking too is disturbed, and that the light of consciousness is

extinguished when the body dies. Appealing to this law the naturalists have regarded it as settled that the soul must of necessity perish with the body. That is a very hasty assertion. Everyday experience teaches that consciousness can be obscured, as e.g. in
[399] sleep, indeed even vanish, as in a deep faint, and yet return, because the life of the soul does not cease. The question whether the soul is in a position to survive the body is connected most closely with the question whether the life of the soul, despite its dependence on the bodily organs, is not already in this existence raised above perishability by the fact that in its deeper foundation, in the hidden nature on which the union of soul and body originally rests, it has powers and conditions for forming for itself a new body, a body of a higher order, when the earthly one is dissolved.

"Man dies like a dog", says a witty physiologist; but, we ask, how then does the dog die? Like a man! That is a fine explanation. The physiologists themselves admit that they do not know what life is; we take them at their word, and remind them that they do not know either what death is. It is thus possible, for here is the limit of our knowledge, that the soul dies with the body, but it is also — for the limit of knowledge cannot be overstepped — possible that the soul survives the body. The objection that a future life cannot be thought, since every attempt to form a distinct representation of a higher world-order dissolves into sheer contradictions, has no validity in strict science. Physics, which keeps strictly to the natural facts, constantly runs up against phenomena whose inner connection it cannot comprehend. It can, after having found out the laws, lay the acknowledged laws at the ground of a corresponding explanation,
[400] and yet the explanation may dissolve into contradiction[1)]. Were natural science to deny the phenomena whose essence it cannot comprehend, it would have to end by denying the whole of nature.

On the secure determination of the limit of knowledge rests the relation between faith and knowledge. When the outermost limit of human knowledge is reached, the solution of the highest tasks of life will always present itself in such a way that there appear two possibilities, equally valid and yet canceling one another: it is possible that the soul is mortal, and it is possible that it is immortal, it is possible

[1)] An example. Ampère explains the magnet as consisting of manifold molecular, parallel and similarly directed electric circuits. From this hypothesis all magnetic phenomena can be interpreted in a manner exactly corresponding to the mathematical formulas. But — these circuits are now supposed to take place in the midst of a conductor (the steel, e.g.), and must then, in accordance with Ampère's own law, leave the molecule and spread over the whole body. The state can therefore not continue, unless the molecule constantly produces a new circuit. But — an electric circuit presupposes a corresponding consumption and a corresponding production of heat; but in the magnet there is no production of heat and no consumption, therefore also no electric circuit.

that there is a living, personal, willing God, but the opposite is also possible. Only when science, after all-sided testing, has given grounded certainty that the one of the two possibilities has the same scientific validity as the other, has knowledge said its last word and must leave the decision to faith. Faith now chooses the one of the two possibilities, unbelief the other. The separation between faith and unbelief takes place by the choice; the choice is not scientific, but absolutely personal, here the choice is made by virtue of personal grounds.

On the foundation determined by the choice philosophical doctrinal edifices can *[401]* again be erected; but these doctrinal edifices now differ from the directly scientific ones in that the grounds are grounds of personality, in that it is not necessity but freedom on which the grounding rests. The riddle and the law thereby enter into a new phase.

It is an objection as well known as it is worn out that the doctrine of personality, by making, in the name of freedom, faith an independent principle of cognition, introduces arbitrariness, violates the laws and comes into conflict with the naturally necessary connection of things. In particular it is the doctrine of miracle that arouses offense. It may, one says, from the standpoint of science well be admitted that there is much that is enigmatic in nature. Natural science indeed constantly discovers new phenomena, new forces and new possibilities; but these discoveries can by no means weaken our conviction of the necessary connection of things, since every new discovery is, if not always a discovery of new laws, yet an extension and confirmation of those already known. With the principle of will, on the other hand, arbitrariness is introduced; but arbitrariness, the watchword of wild possibilities, is incompatible with the laws.

How matters stand with this question can be illuminated from a human as well as from a divine side. We ascribe to human beings, and not only to them but also to animals, arbitrary movements, movements which have their cause in immediate self-determination. If it were now really true that every manifestation of arbitrary self-determination ran counter to the laws of nature, then one would necessarily have *[402]* to assume one of two things: either arbitrariness is an appearance, and there is nothing arbitrary at all, or, if there are arbitrary manifestations of life, then arbitrariness must at every moment violate the laws. If both assumptions must be declared false, then it is thereby also given that the arbitrariness of self-determining beings may very well be reconciled with unchangeable laws.

There is in existence a thoroughgoing opposition between the essence of nature

and of spirit, of necessity and of freedom, but there is in the principle itself just as little any conflict between the laws of the two regions as there is within the compass of the realm of nature any conflict between the mechanical and chemical laws.

Yes, one continues from the side of criticism, Such things can well be heard in this way in general, and as long as they are only heard in all generality, it sounds quite good; but if we bring forward the cases, the absurdity shows itself at once. That the arbitrariness of the human will cannot break the connection of nature follows directly from the fact that man's will is impotent; but according to the supreme fundamental thought of the doctrine of personality, God's almighty will is supposed to be able to intervene arbitrarily in the order of nature, to perform miracles and thus to break the laws. — Here again is a mixture of true and false. It is quite certainly a distinguishing mark of the miracle that it has the almighty will as its freely determining cause; but it is, from the standpoint of faith and of personality, by no means the mark of the miracle that it should involve a breach of the divine laws. To make the contrary-to-law the
[403] mark of the miracle is an invention of the more recent criticism. The reason why this invention has gained such strong currency that the proposition is now close to being exalted into one of the great fundamental principles of science, lies plainly open. In order to look like science and to botch the explaining or at least the defending of the miracle, theology has from time out of mind had to overstep the limit of knowledge; in order to refute the botched explanation and to be rid of the miracle, negative criticism has for its part likewise been tempted to overstep the limit of knowledge. Theology concludes: if God is almighty, then he must be able at pleasure to annihilate the natural causes and suspend the laws; criticism concludes: if God performs a deed that cannot be explained according to the laws known to us, then he does a misdeed and comes into contradiction with himself. That is false logic[1)]. The empty reasoning about what God can do and what God cannot do confuses the brains.

According to what has here been adduced, anyone with sound understanding
[404] and ordinary cultivation will now be able to say to himself how important it is that

[1)] By altering the expression and saying: an event that conflicts with a single one of the laws known to us conflicts with all laws, one wins only an ambiguous advantage. The expression, to conflict with a law, can namely be taken in two senses. It can mean: to stand in contradiction to the concept of law as law (to draw a round square, to exhibit an effect without a cause, to set 2 + 2 = 5 and the like). In this sense the expression finds no application to the miracle. It can next mean: to be in apparent conflict with a real law, so that the fulfillment of the unknown law seems to cancel the known one. In this sense the expression finds application not only to the miracle, but also to natural events among themselves. Let us imagine that someone who had hitherto learned only to explain phenomena by mechanical laws suddenly became a witness of surprising phenomena of magnetic, electric, electromagnetic laws: would he not then think that he saw nothing but wonders?

once for all a limit be set between what can be known and what cannot be known; only when the limit is set, and its validity acknowledged, will life and science be able to meet in honest understanding and look one another in the eye. A task of such thoroughgoing significance will naturally gradually press forward and be treated in all countries by all thinkers, as far as science reaches; but that does not exclude that its solution may lie nearer to the one national individuality than to the other. German speculation has gone beyond the limit; English empirical philosophy has not reached the limit; French logic of the understanding, with its exact and yet mobile forms, makes the limit fluid and abstract by making it mathematical; it is then not unreasonable that a people whose peculiar literature has a Holberg for its father and a profound mythology for its mother, a people with whose plain sound understanding it so naturally accords that it has not hurried itself into building heaven-storming systems, but has given itself time and begun only to philosophize on its own account after it has secured in natural science, history and poetry a sound foundation for the doctrine of spirit, that, we say, such a people might perhaps have its eyes opened to one of the most essential tasks of the present age, that its late-born philosophy might grow with the task and further its solution by contributing, if only a contribution; a contribution is always something.

R. *Nielsen.*