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## Interpretation.

BY THE RIGHT REV. PRINCIPAL IVERACH, D.D., ABERDEEN, MODERATOR OF THE  
UNITED FREE CHURCH GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

INTERPRETATION is a wide word, and its meaning is very comprehensive. The process which we call interpretation begins with the very beginning of our life, and continues while life lasts. The baby new to earth and sky has instincts and beliefs which help to make him at home in the world in which he is. He speedily learns that fire burns, that food is pleasant, that light is good and darkness terrible. In fact, he is unconsciously engaged in a series of interpretations, and learns that light falling on the eye becomes vision, and that these simple sensations of light can become judgments of distance, direction, and a means of controlling his own action and the action of the environment. He interprets sight, smell, touch, sound, until the world of sensation becomes a world of meaning which is so far intelligible and controllable. The whole process goes on without deliberate reflexion, and his activity is directed towards a working knowledge of the world in which he lives. His own unconscious process of interpretation is reinforced and strengthened by the social environment in which he lives. He learns to speak, and learns to attach meanings to the words spoken to him. He is heir to a spoken language, and part of his training is to learn how to attach concrete meanings to the words he uses and other people use. A large part of our interpretation is to make the words we inherit become part of us, and instruments of further interpretation. To fill up their meaning, to translate into our own concrete experience, and to make them expressive of our personal life is part of our education, and we do not succeed in this task until words which were abstract and in the air are taken down and made part of the current coin of our everyday life. So then the world in which we live is a world of interpretation, a world of meaning, a world created by man and appropriated and added to by each citizen of it as he interprets it anew in terms of his own experience. In brief, we do not live in a world which is made, we are in a world that is in the making, a world to which new meanings are being added, and new values are being created generation after generation.

### I.

It may be said broadly that the early experience of the individual and of the race is of the external world. Both are so much occupied with what is needful to make them at home with the environment that they never think of themselves. They have to become acquainted with the objects around them, to know how to behave amid the constancies of the environment, how to make those subservient to need and want, so that of themselves as factors in the process they take no account. So they find that the environment may be made to supply food, clothing, shelter, that they may modify it so as to make the acquirement of these more easy and more sure.

But alongside of the interpretation and control of the environment there goes another story, the story of the other factor, the story of man's interpretation of himself. Lost at first in the environment, concerned on'y with it and its movements, and how to submit to them, adapt himself to them, and control them, man began to reflect on himself, on his own states, on his own experience of himself, on the processes within himself which were helpful towards the control of the world. So he became, in some measure, conscious of himself. He was conscious of pleasure and of pain, he felt regret at failure, joy at success, and he was led on to reflect on himself and on the position he held in the world. Already he had come to some knowledge of his own action in those attempts which had been successful in his search after the means of controlling the world. Why had some attempts been successful and others not? So there arose a criticism of the ways of control, and it was in this way, I believe, that man was led to reflect on himself as a being who had the power or possibility of successful action. He found that for this end he had to interpret himself to himself, and to learn something of the ways in which his mental nature worked, what were the processes of feeling, volition, thought, which were somehow linked together and directed towards that control of the world on which action depended. So there

grew up the series of interpretations which we name æsthetics, ethics, logics, psychologies, philosophies, theologies, which to-day form a new sphere of interpretations, which also form the wealth of the spiritual world in which we live, and the source of all our blessedness.

Whether our thought is directed towards the magnitudes of the world, towards the quantities which can be measured, weighed, classified, and described, or whether our mind is directed towards the mind that weighs, measures, and estimates, in either case we are confronted with the processes and results of interpretation. Further, we have to interpret the correspondences between the objective world and the subject which interprets. As a matter of fact, when we are occupied with the objective world when we are tracing and seeking to describe the elements which we regard as constant, such as gravitation, light, heat, electricity, and all that we describe as uniformities, laws, and so on, we have left in the background all thought of the subject, and are dealing only with those processes which for the moment we regard as going along by themselves. If we invent formulæ, if we design calculuses, and form hypotheses, we do it simply in order to picture for ourselves the actual objective ongoing of the phenomena. We are engaged in the effort to understand what is going on, with a view to the control of it. So we say to ourselves there is gravitation, there are the laws of thermo-dynamics, there is the law of the conservation of energy, there are in the biological world laws of evolution such as the struggle for existence, the survival of the fittest, and so on. But all these laws, as also all the sciences, are the outcome of the effort of man to understand and to control the world in which he lives. For that purpose they have been slowly excogitated, and are instruments in the human hand for the control of the world.

Our sciences, all our mathematical formulæ, all our physical, chemical, biological, physiological, psychological theories are our own work, wrought out in the effort to describe the world in which we live. The wonder is that they do work. Why should they? Why should we have power of making hypotheses, of guessing at the secret of any aspect of the world, of taking that short way towards the goal of explanation, and should then find it true? This correspondence between the working of the human mind and the world in

which man lives is wonderful, and has large consequences.

## II.

The sciences therefore endeavour to interpret the world, and they at the same time illustrate the nature and the working of the human mind. They are all of them constructions of the human mind in its endeavour to understand the world. They are also so far descriptions of the processes of the world. Indeed, science is becoming modest, and is inclined at present to limit itself to a descriptive process of what is actually going on. Many scientists modestly describe their work as simply descriptive. They disclaim any inquiry into origins, they repudiate any knowledge of causes, they simply find sequences and describe them. In short, many of them tell their readers that theirs is only a descriptive account of what they find in nature, and that theirs is no attempt to make a theory of the universe. Now and then, however, say at a meeting of the British Association, we obtain a manifesto to the effect that science is competent to explain the universe, and to set forth a complete account of it. We are more than astonished when the claim is made, not on behalf of science in general, inclusive of the sciences which deal with life, and with human life, but in the name of physics and chemistry. Or, as it is put by Mr. Hugh S. Elliot in the October number of the *Edinburgh Review*, 'the central doctrine of scientific materialism is the uniformity of natural law, the invariable sequence of cause and effect, the doctrine that every motion of a material particle is consequent, and necessarily consequent, upon some pre-existing cause of exclusively physical or material characteristics.' I am far from denying that the notions enumerated by Mr. Elliot in the foregoing statement have a certain amount of plausibility, and interpretation acting on them does explain a great deal of human experience. We look naturally for sequences, conformities, uniformities, recurrences, and we find them. We look for antecedents and consequents, and strive to establish their identity. We seek to link things into causal sequence, and we tend to overlook all that will not fall into this linkage. And the wonder is that we gather together all the concepts which Mr. Elliot has enumerated in the foregoing quotation, and assert, as scientific materialism does, that they interpret and explain the

universe. We ignore the difficulty of establishing the uniformity of nature, or of proving that the linkage of cause and effect is the only linkage which binds things into unity. For after all, not uniformity but change is the fact familiar to our experience, and not sameness, such as materialism fancies, but change, progress, evolution are the facts which we experience. And beyond these there is the fact of contingency, and the additional fact that we are confronted continually with the difficulty of combining, say, our mathematical theorems with experimental facts; and the Kantian question of how science is possible has not yet received an answer. Yes, mathematics itself has been removed far from the presuppositions by means of which Kant endeavoured to show how science is possible. Mathematics has passed away from the space of experience with its three dimensions, the space of ordinary experience, and is engaged in setting forth space and the properties of more than three dimensions. Thus the *Critique of Pure Reason* falls to be written over again.

But my main contention here is that our partial concepts with their assumptions are so far true, and that science has given us verifiable results so far. Why? Briefly because the universe is responsive to its highest product. If you can grasp it by any real handle it will respond, and yield itself so far to our grasp of it. So our grasp of reality, as revealed to us in our practical life, in the shape of all the products of human labour—for instance houses, cities, railways, telephones, and so on—or in the shape of our literature, our art, our ethics, our religion, though it be the outcome of merely imperfect knowledge, and partial points of view, is yet a real factor in the making of the world. Looking back over the history of mankind, the most wonderful thing in it is just the fact that nature responds to our abstractions, and rewards our labours. That is something to be thankful for. But the issue changes when we begin to take the cackle of our bourg for the murmur of the world, and to make our scientific concepts the form and measure of reality. I do not speak merely of the sciences of physics and chemistry, and of the attempt to reduce all phenomena to the level of these. I for one welcome the protest that has been raised by biology and its claim to use its own method, to make its own formulæ, to construct its own theory of itself from data which are given by life, and

which physics and chemistry have no knowledge of. Life has its own method, its own order, and its own organization, and biology is using these for the description of life and its evolution. But then biology in its turn is inclined to push its application of concepts invented by itself into other spheres which are not merely the phenomena of life. You have again to alter your terms when you come to that form of life which is conscious of itself and its meaning. So you have sciences such as æsthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and other sciences, which deal with life which has an inner life, which is conscious of itself and of the world. And here the methods of biology, while of some value, have not the final word to say. The methods of interpretation are ever varying, ever growing, and no less in psychology, logic, and philosophy. And each interpretation, however adequate it may seem to be, only serves as material for a new interpretation. But as we survey to the best of our power the series of sciences, and watch what they have accomplished, we note that there are many experiences which are not gathered up into their net. Not even the least atom of matter, if atoms there still be, is sufficiently accounted for. It has in it at the same time heat, light, electricity, and so on, and each of the physical sciences deals with only one or other aspect of it. Not all the resources of physics can really tell what takes place when we use a spoon to stir our cup of tea, or what really takes place when a solid passes into a liquid form.

Passing at a leap over many sciences, we ask, What does psychology profess to do? For one thing, it does not profess to describe a man. It modestly tells you, in the words of one of its greatest authorities, that psychology is not biography. Nor does logic nor metaphysics profess to give you knowledge of the individual. Psychology describes mental processes as they might appear to an abstract spectator; logic lays down the rules of correct thought, and so on. What I lay stress on is that part of our experience which is not gathered up in the wide net of the abstract sciences. Take psychology and its refusal to deal with biography. As we think of it, and try to understand its far-reaching significance, we find that the meaning is that a large part of human experience lies outside the scope which psychology has regarded as proper to itself and its method of research. The same remark may safely be made

of all other sciences, whether these concern nature or man. Experience is wider than the presuppositions which we bring to it, and by which we seek to interpret it. We may ask with Kant what are those presuppositions which make experience possible, but to answer that question is a very different thing from the successful attempt to gather up experience and organize it by means of these presuppositions. If Dr. Ward's maxim, that psychology is not biography, is true—and I, at least, do not doubt its truth—psychology leaves out of account a large part of the working knowledge of the world. I do not say that this working knowledge is contrary to psychology or to logic—it really works within the rules of psychology—but it is so unique, so personal, that you can scarcely subsume it under general rules. It is knowledge of men that counts in the business of the world, not knowledge of the processes common to all men. This knowledge of men, whether it refers to the action of a great political leader, and his insight into the character and actions of his countrymen, or whether it may be the fascination of a great military leader, or the power exerted by any man over his fellows—we find that in the long run this power depends on his knowledge of men on the one hand, and on that personal force which flows forth from his massive personality on the other. How do you explain the fascination for his students of a certain professor, and how account for the fact that he is the hero of successive generations of students. Other professors are as learned as he, others have written books which are text-books in many universities, and yet they exert no fascination over their students, have a difficulty in maintaining order, and so on. It seems to me, then, that my proposition, that a large part of the working knowledge of the world lies outside the sphere in which abstract science works, at least so far as abstract science has yet been formulated, is worthy of consideration.

### III.

I am to get very bold at this stage and to say that for the interpretation of experience you have to get beyond the sciences and the philosophies, and to recognize something which may provisionally be described as the influence of personality. That is a force which we find everywhere in operation in the history of the world. I, for one, cannot separate the history of the world, or the present

state of the world, from the influence and the power of personality as the greatest of all the operative forces. It is not without significance that all the religions of the world which tend towards universality are those which have had a personal founder. Nor is it without a meaning for us that all the great theorems in mathematics, all the generalizations in physical science, all the discoveries in chemistry, are named with personal names. And when we describe electricity, buy or sell it, we do it in personal names, and speak of Watts, Ohms, Ampères, Volts, and so on. There is hardly any law of science which has not a personal name. Our systems of philosophy are called Platonic, Aristotelian, Kantian, Hegelian; and this fact is also not without a meaning. When we read science, or study philosophy, we are moving within the sphere of personal influence, and this is a factor in interpretation which deserves recognition. If we cannot bring it within the recognized rules, that is no reason why we should not recognize it as a fact, and as a reason why we should not press general rules beyond their measure, and make them the sole means of interpretation. As for myself, I feel that when I read Plato I am conscious not merely of his insight, of the subtle power of his dialectic, but I seem to feel across the ages the impact of a great personality, which exerts a power over me which almost defies definition. The great systems are personal as well as interpretative of experience, and the great thinkers are makers as well as thinkers. And this personal element has to receive recognition in interpretation. If this is true in science and philosophy, it is far more true in art, in poetry, and in oratory. You may formulate the power of a great painting, or of a great poem, under certain technical rules, and make these as exhaustive as possible, but the effect of the impact of personality on personality, which is of the essence of the matter, escapes your description. This impact is not summed up by the description of the thought in the poem, or in the painting, nor is it exhausted by a technical description of the ways in which they illustrate the excellences of poetry or painting; behind and beyond all these is the revelation of the personality of the painter, or of the painted, and that impression is the thing that haunts us in our dreams, moulds our characters, and shapes our lives. What we thus feel with regard to those parts of our experience which are the outcome of

the creative activity of man, in science, art, poetry, philosophy, may be, nay, actually is, felt by us when we watch the sunrise, or contemplate the sunset, or when we let ourselves respond to the beauty or sublimity of nature. If, after all, one of our highest sources of gladness in our reading of the great masterpieces of thought or of art is the sense of fellowship and communion with the great personalities that made them, why should we not allow ourselves to feel that in the presence of the beautiful world in which we live we are in the presence of some one greater than the world? What is to hinder us from feeling that 'the presence of the power which disturbs us with the joy of elevated thoughts' is a presence that can make itself felt by us in nearer and more intimate ways?

It is not without significance that there is a great movement in the world of thought, partly of

revolt against our abstract systems of the interpretation of experience, and partly in favour of a more spiritual interpretation. You have Eucken in Germany, Croce in Italy, and Bergson in France, differing no doubt in many ways, yet all agreed in laying stress on the spiritual, and on those elements of experience which have eluded the grasp of the abstractions of which we are so fond. Yet interpretation must go on, and each generation and each man must do their own work, and all interpretations must themselves be interpreted in the light of the wider experience which indeed they have helped to form. For the world to be interpreted is a world that is in the making, and it is becoming a greater world, as the white radiance of eternity is being stained into many pictures by the creative activity of man in his response to and intercourse with the eternal Spirit.

## The Great Text Commentary.

### THE GREAT TEXTS OF ROMANS.

#### ROMANS I. 18.

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold down the truth in unrighteousness.**

ST. PAUL has enunciated his great thesis in the part of the Epistle preceding the text. There has arrived into the world a new and Divine force making for man's fullest salvation—the disclosure of a real fellowship in the moral being of God, which is open to all men, Jew and Gentile alike, on the simple terms of taking God at His word. This word of good tidings St. Paul is to expand and justify in his Epistle; but first he must pause and explain its antecedents.

Why was such a disclosure needed at this moment of the world's history? Why has St. Paul spoken of 'salvation,' or why does he elsewhere speak of 'redemption,' instead of expressing such ideas as are most popular among ourselves to-day—development or progress? It is because, to St. Paul's mind, man as he is is held in a bondage which he ought to find intolerable, and the first step to freedom lies in the recognition of this. Again, why does St. Paul lay such emphasis

on faith, mere faith, only faith—why does he insist so zealously on the exclusion of any merit or independent power on man's part? It is not only because faith, the faculty of mere reception and correspondence, represents the normal and rational relation of man to God, his Creator, Sustainer, Father. It is also, and with special emphasis, because there has been a great revolt, a great assertion of false independence on man's part; and what is needed first of all is the submission of the rebel, or much rather the return of the prodigal son, simply to throw himself on the mercy of his Father and acknowledge his utter dependence upon Him for the forgiveness of his disloyalty, as well as for the fellowship which he seeks in the Divine life. The fuller statement, therefore, of St. Paul's gospel must be postponed to the un-cloaking of what man is without it. The note of severity must be struck before the message of joy. We must be brought to acknowledge ourselves to be not men only, but corrupt men, doomed men, powerless to deliver ourselves, and ready therefore to welcome in simple gratitude the large offer of God's liberal and almost unconditional love.