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JOHN LAIRD

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1887–1946

IN a leading journal the remark was recently made that while the writer might have sincere doubts as to 'whether there is such a thing as Moral Philosophy in the sense that there is such a thing as Algebra', he had 'nothing but admiration for Moral Philosophers', and he continued: 'We prefer to look . . . on Moral Philosophy not as a body of knowledge but as a quest.' The author of the article might conceivably have been thinking of such a man as Professor Laird, who, although for many years he held a chair of Moral Philosophy, confessed that he regarded it as a 'somewhat restricted subject', and, whenever he had freedom of choice in lecturing, escaped frequently in the direction of Metaphysics. Obviously he did not regard Moral Philosophy as a self-contained 'body of knowledge', and he conceived of his broader philosophical task as essentially a quest. In his own view it was a quest never completed and never successful, but others would not have agreed with such a humble version of his achievement, and the sincerity and ability with which he pursued his quest won the admiration even of those who were not fully satisfied by the finished works in which he copiously expressed his ideas. The *Scotsman* memorial article speaks of him as 'one of the most highly equipped and learned critical philosophers of his time'.

Professor Laird was a Scottish philosopher in more senses than one. The place of his birth and early upbringing was a purely rural country manse in a northern Scottish county, and in later years it seemed to him symbolic that his own home was adjacent to the parish in which Thomas Reid was born, and was therefore suggestive of a connexion with Scottish Philosophy. 'I noticed the fact in my dreams', he said—dreams, perhaps of a life devoted to philosophy, or of a conscious philosophical creed resembling in many respects that associated with the name of Reid.

He was Scottish also by descent, and an ecclesiastical descent at that. He thus inherited that appreciation of sound learning which used to be characteristic of Scottish manses, and a love of theological speculation, perhaps sometimes too carefully concealed and with him more implicit than explicit. He also inherited a sense of vocation, but in his case a 'calling' towards

philosophy rather than to preaching. In his first book he says: 'Every man dallies with metaphysical conjectures, but there are very few who try to think philosophical questions out, resolutely and to the end, and unless a man makes this attempt, he has not begun to be a philosopher.' (*Problems of the Self*, p. 2.) Yet, despite his conscious decision, he was a born preacher, if not in the pulpit, then in the class-room and in his books, bent upon calling back those who wander from the path of intellectual rectitude, those who are disabled by woolliness of thinking or insincere in their attitude to truth, or tempted towards serious divagations in the direction of sentiment. Professor Ritchie says of him that 'He was not a man to take over any of his ideas at second hand'. He would not likely have agreed with John Buchan in the latter's view that 'there was nothing to be said against the retention of prejudices', and his addition that he 'believed in every man having a good stock of them, for otherwise we should be flimsy ineffective creatures and deadly dull at that': Professor Laird would rather have said that our flimsiness and ineffectiveness and even our dullness are due exactly to our prejudices, and that we shall never be properly alive intellectually, and perhaps even practically, until we have got rid of most of them. Perhaps Laird was a little too apt to overrate the importance of the dry light of reason, and to dismiss the claims of the emotional parts of our nature by equating them with prejudice, but even in early life he felt the force of what he said in one of his latest books (*Device of Government*, p. 153): 'Familiarity is an obstacle to sound analysis', and it was his mental sincerity which made him impatient of all claims to extra-rational licence, however much they might justify themselves by reverence for the past or on romantic grounds. In another of his later books he is severe, for example, upon Robert Bridges and his diatribes against the smallness and subtle refinements of reason. He thus states his opinion: 'To say that reason's "embranglements" may be neglected is just to say that contradictions do not matter, that philosophers are at liberty to talk the right kind of nonsense. But nonsense is always nonsense. To say that reason has just to accept axioms with docility from extra-rational sources is quite false if there be any axiom of which a rational man can say *per se patet*.' (*Philosophical Incursions into English Literature*, p. 211.) So, a philosophy of common sense, with such enlightenment as this may provide, is indicated as likely to be characteristic of the whole of his philosophical development.

Both the place of his birth and his ancestry were in harmony with his after career. He was born in the little country manse of Durris, where his father was minister, the third in direct family succession to adopt this calling. It does not appear that Laird ever entertained the idea of following in his father's footsteps, but this ecclesiastical ancestry had an indirect influence upon him, at one remove and contrariwise, as it were, showing itself in a rebelliousness against mere conventional religion, and more particularly in a resentment against the idea that, just because he was the son of the manse, he should be expected to be religious; the resentment leading to the additional precautionary desire never to be taken for *more* religious than he really was. Although his theological upbringing was not particularly narrow—in fact less narrow than might have been expected in his environment—some unchallenged dogmatic assumptions may have lingered irksomely in his memory, and provoked slightly satirical but not unkindly comment. On occasion he could tilt against the strict doctrine of inspiration, though it is not likely that any attempt was ever made to impose such a doctrine upon him, and he sometimes seems to think a little bitterly and even cynically about the formalities of his religious upbringing. In lighter vein he can speak of one of Shelley's characters instructing the Deity about cosmological procedure 'like a highland minister in his prayers' (*Incursions*, p. 187). But he carried with him through life a deep reverence for the Christian faith, and that reverence showed itself as much more than conventional when he came to set forth his theistic beliefs in his latest and most important works; and he could speak also with special intensity of conviction of the influence of the Christian belief in the Incarnation (cf. *Incursions*, p. 166). And one could never doubt the sincerity of the general religious attitude when he says in the book just referred to: 'It is only the poorer sort of man who remains unmoved when the storm-centre is in things invisible.'

The physical environment of his early years seemed also to be symbolically harmonious with his character and subsequent career. His home was set just where the beautiful Dee valley becomes smoother as the river comes nearer to the sea. But there are adjacent view-points from which could be seen, to the west the high peaks of the Cairngorms, to the south the rugged country dominated by the Cairn o' Mounth, and to the north the lonely Cabrach district, from which some of his ancestors had come. Of this mingling of stern mountains and smiling valleys there seemed to be a reflection in his own character,

a union of a distancing sternness with tender kindliness, which latter quality he sometimes seemed to do his best to conceal, as if he were afraid of being better liked than he felt he deserved to be. A defensiveness against sentimentality of approach was little needed in his case, and there had infiltrated into his nature something of the ruggedness of his country-side, the steadfastness of its people, and the directness and non-expansiveness of its language. He had a hatred of every kind of pretentiousness, and rather enjoyed 'debunking' people and situations if he could do so with justification and without too devastating effects. He even disliked 'figurehead' positions, and was slightly unappreciative of the amount of useful work which might be done by those thus imprisoned in dignity. He cherished with great intensity the ideal of sincerity, perhaps sometimes making an 'idol' of it, to borrow a distinction he himself makes in one of his books. This even affects his choice of terms in severely philosophical writing. He tells us in his first book that he preferred the term 'self' to the term 'soul', because the latter was 'too aristocratic to have its ancestry scrutinised or its income assessed'.

The country and district of his childhood and school-days never lost its appeal for him. Towards the end of his life, when he had already spent over twenty years as a professor in Aberdeen, he said that he hoped to end his days there, and was glad that he had never been tempted to leave it. If any should wonder—although, of course, it is inconceivable that any Aberdonian should so wonder, however practice might diverge from sentiment!—why a man of Professor Laird's world-wide reputation should not have sought a wider sphere and moved nearer to the so-called centres of learning, perhaps the influence of the 'call of the blood' might be brought to mind. At the close of his school-day period—which, according to himself, elicited the verdict that he was a 'boy who might go far, but probably wouldn't'—his family moved to Edinburgh, and in 1904 he entered Edinburgh University. He himself did not view his life there as crowned with a retrospective halo of romance, and he was influenced gently rather than forcefully by his teachers and his experiences; but his academic career was distinguished, both in English Literature and in Philosophy. One of his contemporaries, and his most persistent rival in respect of academic honours, describes him as 'a very young and rosy-cheeked boy who soon established his place as one of the most brilliant students of his time'. The remark is added that

'his conquests gave one the impression of being effortless'. Laird himself did not feel that Edinburgh had had any very lasting influence upon him. His chief devotion was reserved for R. P. Hardie, one of the lecturers in the Philosophy department. He admired Pringle-Pattison, but without enthusiasm, thinking that he was too much occupied in transmitting, beautifully no doubt, the tradition of the 'perennial philosophy', and that his lectures 'smelled of lavender'. On the whole, Edinburgh University seemed to him to provide a good course in the history of ideas but did not prepare for a good degree in philosophy.

Things were different when he went to Cambridge. The influence of tradition weakened and the actual concrete handling of the problem became the important thing. Emphasis shifted from epistemology to other regions of philosophical investigation. That the Cambridge group of teachers (which included Ward, McTaggart, Moore, and Bertrand Russell) had an abiding influence on his philosophical attitude, is perhaps best illustrated in his *Study in Realism*. In the short autobiography which he prefixes to his contribution to *Contemporary British Philosophers* he says that when he went to Cambridge he 'began all over again', but we might add that he was always doing this during the whole of the rest of his life. 'I came', he says, 'to prefer dialectic to history, more special to broader inquiries, a grain of proof to a bushel of sweeping suggestion, and I did my best to be as candid as I could. . . . At Cambridge in these days we followed an argument in the spirit of adventure, and not with the object of making for port. In our view nothing was final but the rules of sound navigation, and every one seemed ready to be argued out of his fundamental conception of the term before.' This negligence of the broader result, this conviction that nothing was final except the rules of sound thinking, remained with him through life, and gave additional vitality to all his work both in writing and in teaching. Forty years afterwards one of his Honours students describes the vigour and verve with which, taking, as a loyal Cambridge man, the Oxford deontologists as his particular antagonists, he would throw himself into the dialectical fray, and infuse into his lectures the enthusiasm of the conflict. The attitude also engendered in him a mood of what might be called serious playfulness. Arriving in port did not really matter so long as the navigating rules were observed. 'It is all a game', he exclaimed once to me, after lecturing to a Logic class we were temporarily sharing; and in

one of his last conversations with me he rebutted the charge of unpracticality sometimes brought against Indian philosophers, on the ground that they were not compelled to look beyond the argument in the direction of its results, but could play the philosophical game if they wanted to, without any anxious concern about consequences. In a sense his attitude represented the old Indian metaphysical conception of *lila* or 'sport', and revealed a similar dislike of stereotyping and finalism. But if this suggested a game, it was one very far removed from frivolity, and, like the Indian conception, contained a deep ethical and metaphysical seriousness. He once said: 'I tend to choose a largish theme, and then I poke about with a smallish torch.' He delighted in poking the torch here and there, and flashing it into obscure corners, but, all the same, he was not regardless of the consideration that in thus manipulating his torch he might be able to dispel some of the darkness which obscured the 'largish themes'.

The outward events of his subsequent active career are soon told. He was able to fulfil his intention of training himself to become a teacher of philosophy. Then, after a short period as assistant in St. Andrews, he held a very brief appointment as professor of philosophy in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and subsequently settled down for ten years in Queen's University, Belfast, where he worked steadily at the development of his philosophical position and produced his first important book—*Problems of the Self*—based on lectures delivered under the foundation of the Shaw Fellowship, to which he had been appointed while still at Cambridge. The only considerable break in the Belfast period was a year's work as visiting professor in the University of California, where he was greatly interested in fresh aspects of the educational situation, but derived only moderate enjoyment from the actual work he had to do. He thought that lecturing to a class of 600 students was rather too large an order, and, in fact, came to the conclusion that many things in California were on too big a scale.

In 1924 he became what he had always wished to be—a Scots professor of philosophy, and for the rest of his life, twenty-two years, he held the chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Aberdeen, with considerable contentment. He confessed that he had always regarded a Scots professor as *ex officio* something of a 'person', and such a position represented for him the fulfilment of a modest ambition, but one in relation to which he never lost his sense of humour and ran no risks of developing

pomposity of manner, a not unknown accompaniment of such a position. He adjusted himself very happily to the quiet rhythm of the work of his chair. He was slightly distressed, however, at the paucity of numbers in the Honours Philosophy classes, which he attributed partly to the fact that Aberdeen had always insisted on a pure philosophy course in Honours—of which arrangement he personally approved—and partly to the greater variety of choice in subject which recent university regulations had made possible. Prospective lawyers chose Economics and History rather than Philosophy, and those proceeding to Divinity studies preferred English Literature, in the hope that they would thus make their sermons more interesting. This hope Professor Laird regarded as vain, because he thought that theology was nothing without metaphysics, and that a non-theological minister was a vague creature intellectually. In his *Incursions* (p. 89) he says: 'A sermon is not an ideal vehicle for conveying across metaphysics. Its principal aim is to strike upon the minds of unphilosophical hearers for twenty minutes or half an hour, but it is better for having a sound philosophy behind it.' Within his own department he sometimes, indeed, gave the impression that concentration upon what he thought was the rather restricted subject of Ethics was for him a matter of duty rather than of inclination, and he repeatedly welcomed the opportunity, by arrangement with his colleagues, of lecturing on metaphysics. He found, as he put it, that 'metaphysics was always breaking in', and the operational distribution of his work was based on the principle that 'in most disputes, metaphysics is somewhere in the neighbourhood, and not always unobtrusively' (*Human Freedom*). It happened also that as the years went on external events rather strengthened in him this preference. Negatively, the by no means cordial reception in certain circles of his latest considerable book on Ethics—*An Enquiry into Moral Notions*—distressed him, and made him, temporarily at least, disinclined to write any more on the subject. Positively, two very desirable invitations opened the door to new opportunities. One of these—to become visiting professor at Columbia University—he unfortunately had to decline because of the state of his health and for other reasons. But his appointment as Gifford lecturer at Glasgow University, which he considered the highest honour he had ever received, he was able to accept. The preparation of these lectures, which are embodied in what are perhaps his two most important books, *Theism and Cosmology* and *Mind and Deity*, occupied him during most of the war years; not,

however, in such an exclusive way as to prevent his taking a full share in the extra-academic duties which were imposed upon him, as on so many of his colleagues, during that exacting period.

His relations with his students in Aberdeen showed a mingling of aloofness and cordiality. In writing of his life at Cambridge Professor Laird says, in the short autobiography appearing in *Contemporary British Philosophers*: 'I remained aloof, being extremely anxious not to do so. I am not a good mixer by temperament, and am extremely fond of the joys of solitude.' This dualism of temperament seems to have remained with him throughout the years, for one of his most recent students in Aberdeen says of him: 'Outside the class-room he remained a mystery to his students, and his intolerance of the conventionalities of social intercourse and his inability to counterfeit an interest he did not feel produced a certain distancing effect. But,' he adds, 'despite his apparent aloofness, he followed a pupil's career with genuine interest, taking a deep delight in his successes, though careful to conceal this from the student.'

In the class-room the generality of students perhaps found him a little beyond their reach, although they appreciated his ability to make abstruse points clear and were greatly impressed by his fairness and conscientiousness and sense of humour, which 'could raise a laugh even in a 9 a.m. class' (this being the hour at which for more than a century the Moral Philosophy ordinary class had met). They were interested also in his rostrum idiosyncrasies; the energy with which he would sweep away any adjacent impedimenta, and threaten the permanent dissolution of the desk at which he stood, or on which, in quieter moods, he would lean and gaze into space, as if seeking from out the infinite distance the solution of the problem with which he was wrestling. The abler students could follow with intensity of interest the course of his thought. One of his Honours students speaks of the fascinating dialectical character of his lectures, and the power he had of vividly and almost dramatically presenting the viewpoints of the different philosophers. Another disclaims the impression that he could not descend to the level of beginners in his subject, but balances this by saying that 'he could clarify a difficult subject without unduly simplifying it'. His lectures, like his books, required, but also greatly rewarded, close attention. The same student adds: 'If you held tightly to the thread of his argument, he could lead you steadily

through the theory he was discussing until he brought you out at the end with a clear idea of what could logically be proved or disproved, what must be investigated further, where there was room for legitimate differences of opinion, and where a definite answer lay outside man's powers of reasoning.' If a man can produce this result in an ordinary graduation class, he has surely splendidly succeeded as a lecturer, and the striking thing about this student-impression is that it almost exactly describes the mood in which one finds oneself after finishing a closely reasoned argument in one of Professor Laird's many substantial treatises on philosophy.

In regard to these books we may add a few very inadequate comments. The author of them belonged to a university which has included amongst its teachers many voluminous writers with a world-wide reputation, such as Alexander Bain, Sir William Ramsay, Sir J. Arthur Thomson, and Sir George Adam Smith, and Professor Laird was as voluminous as any of them. More than twenty books stand to his credit, some of them major philosophical works, and there is no evidence of deterioration in quality because of over-production. His books were not, of course, of the kind likely to become 'best-sellers', but they were, with one or two exceptions, exceedingly well received by experts most competent to judge, although it may perhaps be a question whether his versatility and his acknowledged excellence in so many different directions did not militate against that more permanent philosophical influence which greater concentration on a special type of problem might have enabled him to exercise. Mr. C. D. Broad in 1918, after speaking enthusiastically of the delight with which he had read his first book (which he describes as 'much the best book on the subjects treated in it which I have read'), concludes his review in *Mind* with the humorous remark: 'Prof. Laird maintains a standard almost as high as that which he seems to consider normal in maiden aunts "whose usual accomplishments", he says on p. 260, "include the power to knit, to read a novel and to engage in conversation simultaneously".'

This first book, an expansion of his Shaw Lectures, and entitled *Problems of the Self*, is characteristic. His hatred of all pretentiousness is revealed even in the choice of a title. As already said, he designedly chose the term 'self' rather than the term 'soul' for reasons which we have quoted. The contents of the book are evidence also of that mixture of confidence and humility, that union of matter-of-factness of

approach with a reverent religious attitude and strain of mysticism which are emergent in all his work. The two aspects are connected through the consideration that his confidence is not in himself but is born of a sturdy realism which faces resolutely the facts of any situation and forces them to yield conclusions of a spiritual character, sometimes seeming even to surprise himself. In a sense the book is a manifesto of his philosophical intentions and a statement of his persisting philosophical creed. He is deliberately anti-materialistic, and it is interesting to note how the same condemnation of crass materialism is repeated in the masterly analysis in *Theism and Cosmology* of the conception of 'Divine Ubiquity'. At the same time he does not see that there is any special merit in non-spatiality, a topic to which he recurs in the later book, expressing surprise that believers in the Incarnation should have so frequently urged the unspirituality of matter. He thinks that it is just prejudice to hold that there 'is anything inferior, evil, despicable or mean in the mere fact of being or having a body', and adds: 'If that be mere prejudice, God would not be conceived meanly or despicably if he were conceived as embodied, and it is hard to understand how any one who believes in divine incarnation could think so.' (*Theism and Cosmology*, p. 197.)

As to the nature of the soul, he says, in his first book, that 'the mistake in the past has been the assumption that the soul is more perfect and more enduring than it really is. Let us guard against the crime of believing that it is less enduring and less perfect.' (*Problems of the Self*, p. 365.) In this book he leaves the question of immortality an open one, with the veil of mystery hanging over it, and is content to wait patiently and hopefully for a more complete and final answer. But he holds firmly to the indefeasible unity and present actuality of the soul, summoning us to a full use of its capabilities. On page 364 he says: 'We know what our souls are, we know the meaning of their identity, we know the sense in which they are distinct and independent of the world. Because we know these things we should hold fast to them and insist first of all upon the reality of our personalities as we find them and so long as we find them.' It is somewhat similar to the mood we discover in *Theism and Cosmology*, p. 228: 'It may be enough to reach the stratosphere without crying for the moon', and hints at a spirit which informed all his philosophy. In *Incursions*, p. 132, he speaks of Shelley as one whose 'spirit was restive to look for a moving deathlessness', and adds, 'such a metaphysic is not unpromising.

It is the attempt to find change and dependability *in* change instead of an unchanging constancy side by side *with* change, to explore something more radical than Plato's suggestion that time was the "moving image of eternity", i.e. was the "mimic" of eternity because time was measured, harmonious, astronomical change, but was only a "mimic" because it moved and so *did* change. While it seems impossible by any alchemy to elude the fact that time has passed and therefore is over and done with, it is not impossible, nevertheless, to look with Heraclitus for law, constancy, and security in the process of coming to be and passing away.'

We have here a hint of a metaphysical attitude which broadened out and characterized all Laird's later speculation. It seems to have had for him some of its provenance in the Heraclitean conception of opposites; and in his exposition of 'eternity' in *Theism and Cosmology* he expands the idea further but on the same lines as in his earlier book. He cannot place the eternal in opposition to the temporal, but can only find the eternal *in* the temporal, a 'moving deathlessness'.

His next book was *A Study in Realism*, which he himself regarded as his best book, and which in the opinion of others tended to fixate his philosophical position, and thus laid him open to attacks which were relevant to Realism in general but not so relevant to his own particular form of Realism. He considered that the book was somewhat overshadowed by Alexander's great work, *Space, Time and Deity*, in which, as he put it, 'realism made one of its greatest gestures'. In the preface to the book he quaintly says that he wished he could have 'felt less like a child in pursuit of a rainbow', but his critics did not find him either immature or particularly childlike. His *Mind* reviewer says of the book that its 'literary quality makes it a delight to read', although he rejoices that the author 'has not, in writing, sought to efface the prickly vigour of his temperament, the natural combativeness of which is but imperfectly chastened by the humility of the Preface'.

The theme of the book was the general thesis of Realism, that 'knowledge is a kind of discovery in which things are directly revealed or given to the mind', and that 'the fact of being known does not imply any effect upon the character or existence of the thing which is known'. The author keeps throughout to the middle path, refusing on the one hand to be dogmatic, and, on the other hand, going so far as to describe a sceptic as a 'would-be Samson (in his denial of logic) who must

himself perish in the ruins he has made' (p. 43). Incidentally the book contains one of the most pungent criticisms I have come across of the epistemological identity doctrine which underlies much eastern mysticism (p. 216). His exposition of Realism was continued four years later (1924) in his contribution to *Contemporary British Philosophers*, in which he described, clearly and forcefully, the particular variety of Realism in which he himself believed. Some smaller books followed in which similar themes were treated in a more popular way. He turned his attention more directly to what he described as the restricted study of ethics, in *A Study in Moral Theory* (1926) and the *Idea of Value*. The latter is one of his most important books, and received as much attention as any of them. It is a difficult book to read, and the interrelation of the three main parts is not very clearly indicated. The persistence of his realistic attitude is shown in that, in connexion with the discussion of relative and absolute value, and the subjectivity and objectivity of value, his preference for the objective view is, on the whole and sometimes very emphatically, indicated. Miss Hilda Oakley concludes her *Hibbert Journal* review by saying that the method of treatment will give the book 'a permanent place in the classics of the subject'.

It may be of interest to notice that in this same review a certain discrepancy was noted between Laird's doctrine of 'natural election' (according to which things have, comparatively speaking, greater affinity with some things than with others) and his timological view of rigidly objective intrinsic value. Miss Oakley seems to think that on the lower levels there is at least a 'semblance of interest' suggesting a subjectivity incongruous with the timological point of view. But Laird himself speaks of the sphere where natural election operates as objectively 'exhibiting the rudiments of mind, of life, and of teleology', and, on the other hand, he is disposed to minimize the subjective or psychological aspect by saying that if on the lower plane there is interest, it is after all little more than a semblance. It is worthy of notice also that Laird developed this idea further in one of his latest books, where he says (*Theism and Cosmology*, p. 260): 'Natural Election, or the principle of selective *use*, does appear to me to describe an immense range of natural fact and to be the fundamental conception in all unidead teleology.'

He next turned his attention to historical writing, rather reluctantly, because he was apprehensive of the danger of

antiquarianism, and thought that younger writers especially were too anxious to discover some author who was fairly prominent without having been too much written up, and bulldozed their way to fame by excavating recondite facts. In general he thought that 'an ounce of original philosophy is worth a sackful of history'. Nevertheless he produced valuable historical studies on *Hume*, on *Hobbes* (for the 'Leaders of Philosophy' series), and on *Recent Philosophy* (for the Home University Library). In the first he had a peculiarly congenial subject; Professor A. D. Ritchie, in an obituary appreciation of Laird, says that 'he would have been peculiarly at home in the Paris or Edinburgh of Hume's generation'.

He reverted to more strictly ethical writing in 1935, when he published his *Enquiry into Moral Notions*. He had long been interested in the problem of the relation between the 'right' and the 'good', and was stimulated to further study through the attention which had been drawn to the subject by the publication of Sir David Ross's *The Right and the Good*, although it was by no means a new topic for discussion. In one of his latest books, *Incursions* (p. 222), Laird tells us that 'the controversy about right versus good, the obligatory versus the attractive, had been revived in Oxford just before and after the First German War, and had, from 1930 onwards, led to a small freshet of English books on that subject alone'. For him the 'freshet' did not have the force of a flood bearing him away, and he combated vigorously the tendency of the Oxford school to separate too far the 'right' and the 'good'. He stressed the difficulty of establishing degrees of rightness, and he could not accept the principle that an action could be right if it were less good than another alternative action. At the same time he felt that the conception of 'well-being' ought to be widened if it were to be put forward as inclusive of the 'right'. He developed the conception of 'relational goods' which he thought had been insufficiently considered in Utilitarian theory, and the inclusion of which, he thought, would show clearly that, for example, justice is not only 'right' and fitting but also 'good'. Although it is to a certain extent a reconciling book, the main theme is stated with challenging incisiveness in the penultimate paragraph: 'The new intuitionists affirm that such (relational) moral obligations have nothing to do with goodness, and this view seems to me to be wholly intolerable and absurd' (p. 314).

This was not, perhaps, his most profound book, and the connexion between its main divisions is not always obvious,

but the problem was for its author an intensely vivid one, and he took it very seriously. He was correspondingly disappointed at the reception which the book met with in various quarters, the popular acceptance of it being more cordial than that of the academic philosophical journals. Amongst the latter one reviewer certainly subjected it to a rather devastating criticism, and a criticism which seemed to stray from the beaten track. The comparatively short review included numerous quotations, one group of which was described as unintelligible *without* the context, and the other as unintelligible *with* the context. At the same time the author was accused of high-handed treatment of the English language and of inaccuracy of expression. Professor Laird was certainly fond of unusual, and occasionally slightly archaic, words. I have found that the meaning of them was not a matter of widely diffused knowledge even in purely academic circles, and that some of them were recognized *only* by the larger dictionaries. But they *were* recognized by these more ponderous authorities, and, furthermore, Professor Laird's use of them was shown to be scrupulously correct. I should prefer to say that he was 'adventurous' in his language rather than 'high-handed'. As to the charge of 'inaccuracy', it was about the last anyone who knew his methods of study and of writing would be disposed to urge in reference to him. He was by no means a rapid or cursory writer, but wrote and re-wrote until he had got a paragraph into the form which he wished it finally to assume. Some of the critics of this book hinted that he was not very expert in analysis, and this again strikes one as an inapposite criticism. The reading of any book of his leaves one with the impression of a natural aptitude for analysis, very excellently applied, although perhaps in the synthesizing of the results of analysis he is not quite so successful.

External events combined with his disappointment at the reception of this book led him at this juncture to turn his attention to metaphysics, and the invitation of Glasgow University to deliver the Gifford Lectures gave him the opportunity of writing what were, perhaps, his two greatest books, *Theism and Cosmology* and *Mind and Deity*. His attitude to natural theology was characteristically midway between humanism and traditionalism, a combination of resolute anti-dogmatism with a slightly wistful appreciation of traditional religion and even of mystical experience. In these books we find the distilled result of much of his previous work, notably, as we have seen, of his *Study in Realism* and his *Idea of Value*, and in the writing

of them he seemed to recapture and revivify much which in his earlier middle life had grown for him stereotyped and empty. He was determined that he would not make use of unproved theological premisses, or take part in any contest in which 'the goal-keeper was also the referee'. But at the same time he was convinced that there was a distinct place for natural theology. 'We are still asking', he says, 'whether a reasoned enquiry into the nature of things is evidence of the deiformity of reality. We still want to know whether we can only weave poetical myths about such matters, or can build a solid foundation of rational argument' (*Theism and Cosmology*, p. 33). In the first volume especially he followed this principle and laid a solid foundation, illustrating what was said of him in a leading newspaper at the time of his death, that 'beginning with doubts he was strangely drawn, by sheer argument, in the direction of certainties'. The certainties, indeed, might not be very plentiful, but for him they were sure, and he made them more secure also for others, even if he did not encourage building nearer to the sky. He was a slightly repressive guardian in respect of all theological speculation, but seemed to think that theologians might be justified if they did not overreach themselves, were careful to estimate the exact amount of weight which the foundations could bear, and were well warned against the 'airy vacuity of assuming that inconclusive proofs are a presumption in favour of the proposed conclusion'. His distinction between teleology and the design argument is typical of his general attitude, and his conclusion is that teleology is immanent and not planned; that the world is deiform, and that a godless world is a misconstrued world.

He carries farther the same principles and methods in his second volume of Gifford Lectures, *Mind and Deity*, which, being less closely integrated and dealing with more elusive and intricate problems, is perhaps not quite on the same high level as its predecessor, although in certain chapters, notably in his criticism of Kant and his exposition of Pantheism, he affords supremely excellent examples of his capacity for analysis. He builds nearer to the sky, and raises a more conspicuous superstructure than in the earlier volume, but he still seems excessively nervous about the strength of his foundations, and afraid of possible disloyalty to his philosophical conscience. In the end he expresses more firmly than ever his conviction that theism (which in his earlier days he had thought to be 'a decrepit metaphysical vehicle harnessed to poetry') can

carry arguments of very considerable weight. It cannot, indeed, be proved demonstrably, he thinks, but it is also in his opinion sinning against the light to suggest that it can be disproved. His attitude is that it does not so much matter whether we speak formally of a transcendent God, provided that we open our eyes wide enough to see the splendour of the divinity that is diffused through a deiform Nature. To conceive of nature materialistically, or from the point of view of scientific determinism merely, is to conceive it too narrowly, and, in short, to misconceive it. 'When we listen to Nature's voice', he says, 'we may be deaf to its divine overtones' (p. 319).

It has been suggested by a modern theologian that there are two main varieties of religious attitude: one demands assurance and certainty; the other seeks for communion in mystery. Professor Laird seemed to combine the two attitudes, and his grievance against theologians is that they do not sufficiently distinguish between them; they profess to find certainty and to provide demonstrative arguments when they ought to have been content with communion in mystery. He himself refused to be satisfied with a purely rational, or even a Kantian moralistic, attitude, especially if it professed—quite unnecessarily, it seemed to him—to be content with a religious experience of a purely subjective character. Although he held that the translation of religious expression into impersonal terms may still be theistic, and himself expressed a preference for belief in an impersonal rather than a personal God, on the ground that what is of supreme importance is what God does in our actual world rather than what He is in the form of a transcendent personality, yet his own realistic attitude at least prepared the way for a belief in a God in some sense embodied, and lessened the difficulties in the way of an acceptance of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

What is almost the concluding paragraph of his *Mind and Deity* indicates the many strands which have been woven into his thinking, reveals his fundamental, though sometimes concealed, humility, and his unshakable integrity, and suggests also a certain wistfulness which made him wish that he could have gone farther in the direction of positive theistic conclusions.

> There is no reason at all [he says (p. 317)] why a man who believes that he has personal acquaintance with a divine spiritual being, or who finds the stamp of truth in what is called revealed religion, should not be an expert and an honest philosopher, and capable of defending his beliefs in a thoroughly philosophical way. It is probable that if

I myself had these experiences, . . . I should have tried to incorporate them in whatever structure of philosophical theology I might have attempted to raise. No one likes to set to work with one of his hands tied deliberately to his side. I regret that I do not myself have the sort of experience, the sort of theopathic susceptibility which so many others honestly believe that they have, and, I daresay, actually do have. I am very willing to believe that this is one of the more serious of my many deficiencies.

This was his last book of a major kind. One of his latest articles, on 'Finality in Theology', contributed to *Philosophy* about a year before his death, makes still more explicit his religious attitude and his characteristic mingling of criticism and friendliness over against theologians. Several smaller books were either published or prepared for publication just before his death. *On Human Freedom* is a reproduction of lectures given in Liverpool, and the title indicates the character of its contents. In his *Device of Government* he treats, from a semi-popular point of view, of the various functions of Government, and analyses in a fascinating manner the conception of the group-mind as a constituent factor in the rise of totalitarianism, referring appositely to Hegel, whose inconsistencies in this reference are detected, while he is also made to bear a burden of philosophical responsibility for Nazi-ism and even for Marxism. The book also includes a brilliant treatment of the problems of internationalism and supra-nationalism.

Since his death there has appeared a volume of essays, entitled *Philosophical Incursions into English Literature*. It breaks new ground in his literary history, and recalls for those who knew his early academic life his outstanding success in the English Literature class at Edinburgh University. In this book he discourses delightfully on such subjects as 'Shakespeare and the Wars of England', 'Robinson Crusoe's Philosophy', and aspects of the poetry of Shelley, Wordsworth, Browning, Robert Bridges, and others.

In his first book Professor Laird said: 'After all, the better a thing is known, the more enigmatical it becomes.' Yet while undoubtedly better understanding always leads to a more complete sense of the complexities of the problem to be solved, while 'reach' always exceeds 'grasp', yet with Laird, in the course of his life the 'grasp' ever became firmer, and the tenacity of his hold strengthened both for him and for others the outreaching attitude which is an essential element in the truly philosophical disposition.

In her review of his *Idea of Value* Miss Hilda Oakley said: 'the observation in the closing paragraph that "Ideals are the poetry of value, but there is also a place for prose", might be taken as a text for the reader's appreciation of the book. For it unites in an unusual way the poetry and prose of the theme, the insight into value and the scientific treatment.' One might generalize this remark and say that the quotation might be applied as a text not only for the appreciation of this book but for the estimate of the whole of Professor Laird's life and work.

The end came, after long-continued illness and much weakness and pain of body, when he was still a decade away from the limit of three-score years and ten. But he had done a great work both in teaching and writing. Many honours had come his way, including the honorary degree of LL.D. from his own University of Edinburgh, the D.Lit. of Belfast, and the Fellowship of the British Academy. In the University of Aberdeen, where he laboured for so many years, he will be greatly missed both by students and teachers alike. His colleagues held him in great respect and valued their fellowship with him. They appreciated always his readiness to take his full share in the administrative and less strictly academic work of the university. They were proud of his achievements in the wider world, and neither they nor the wide circle of those whom he influenced by his books will lightly let his memory die.

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