PROFESSOR JOHN COOK WILSON

1849–1915

The death on August 10, 1915, of Professor John Cook Wilson is a heavy loss to philosophy in England, and particularly in Oxford, where since 1889 he had held the Wykeham Chair of Logic. He was less known to the world than many thinkers with less than a tithe of his power, for he published little, and that little seldom on strictly philosophical problems. But for many years he had been by far the most influential philosophical teacher at Oxford. The present writer is unable to compare his influence with that of T. H. Green; but certainly since him no one there has held a place so important in these studies. He was the teacher not only of several generations of undergraduates but in a marked degree of his younger colleagues; 'to have been' his 'pupil', wrote one of them, 'I count the greatest of philosophical good fortunes'.[1] Many of them felt towards him something of the sentiment which belongs in India to the relation of scholar to master, and one of these, who has undertaken to write this notice, is fully conscious how far short it will fall of displaying what he was in the living intercourse of teaching.

John Cook Wilson was born on June 6, 1849: he was the only son of the Rev. James Wilson, a minister of the Methodist New Connexion, and a man, according to report, of strong and independent character, who on one or two circuits, being unwilling to adapt his teaching to the wishes of his congregation, was brought for a time to great poverty. Mr. and Mrs. James Wilson in their old age retired to the village of Islip, near Oxford, where the Rev. T. W. Fowle was rector, a notable and broad-minded man, with whom John contracted a warm friendship, and wrote a memoir of him in 1903. They had two other children, daughters. All are now buried in Islip churchyard. John used to boast connexion with the family of Oliver Cromwell, and possessed a Bible and a little cabinet supposed to have belonged to the Protector.

John went in September 1862, at the age of thirteen, to the Grammar School at Derby, as a boarder in the house of the head master, the Rev. Walter Clark. He become captain of the school

[1] H. A. Prichard, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, p. iii.

1865–7, and of the cadet corps 1866–7. There were 35 to 40 boys in the house, and 140 or under in the school. A schoolfellow some three years his junior[1] writes of him as head of the school, 'He was a kind, high-spirited, cheerful-minded boy, always ready to suppress any disorder which he happened to consider it desirable to suppress. No one resented the forcible measures to which he promptly applied himself, for he enjoyed a singular reputation amongst the rest of us boys for sincerity of character and directness of method. In fact, I have never met anybody who excelled him in these particulars.' His Oxford friends will see in a story which another schoolfellow[2] relates the very features of the man. He was much interested even then in the drilling of volunteers, and was set one day, in the absence of the drill-sergeant, to drill the small boys, who expected to have an easy time. They soon found themselves mistaken: he 'turned out to be quite a martinet, who compelled us to do everything with extreme care'.

From Derby School Wilson passed with a 'Local Examinations' exhibition to Balliol in January 1868. He had come out third in the Oxford Senior Local Examination of the previous year, and Balliol had offered two exhibitions 'to those among the senior candidates who shall obtain the highest places in the first division of the general list, provided that they are also placed in the first division of the section "Languages"'. He was elected to a scholarship in Mathematics at the College on November 29, 1869, and continued to reside till Easter Term, 1873. He read both Classics and Mathematics, and obtained first classes in each, both in Moderations and in the Final Examination. In 1873 he became a Fellow of Oriel, and remained so till in 1901 he migrated to New College, which then completed with a fellowship the establishment of the Wykeham Chair of Logic. In 1873 also he won the Chancellor's Latin Essay Prize, with a Ciceronian dialogue on the subject 'Quaenam fuerit revera Epicureorum philosophia'; and in 1882 the Conington Prize, on a subject to which he had already devoted much work.[3] Besides being a Fellow of the British Academy, he was an Honorary Doctor of Laws at St. Andrews University. His main teaching, before he became Professor, was done at Oriel, though he also acted as philosophical lecturer or tutor at different periods for divers other colleges, certainly for Balliol, Christ

[1] Mr. J. W. Sharpe, formerly Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.

[2] Dr. E. W. Hobson, F.R.S., Sadlerian Professor of Pure Mathematics, Cambridge.

[3] 'The manner in which the writings attributed to Aristotle have received their present form, to be illustrated especially from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Politics*, and the *de Anima*.

Church, Pembroke, and Hertford. He showed himself from his migration a most loyal member of New College, yet without abatement of his affection for Oriel; and it was a source to him of great pleasure and pride when, in April 1909, Oriel elected him to an Honorary Fellowship.

As a young man (1873–4) he studied in Germany, when that was less common than it became later, and was a pupil of Hermann Lotze, for whom he entertained a great veneration. While studying at Göttingen, he made the acquaintance of his future wife, Charlotte Schneider, whom he married in 1876. She belonged to an official family in Hannover, and her relatives were, so far as the writer knows, the only connexions left to him after his parents' death. It is characteristic at once of his affection, and of a certain unpractical vein there was in him, that when the war broke out, his wife being then dead, he tried to induce some of them to come and live with him in Oxford.

He had by his marriage one son, who emigrated to South Africa shortly after taking his degree, and survives him there. In one sense no marriage could have been happier, for his wife and he were everything to each other. But Mrs. Wilson's health, after her child was born, failed at intervals for many years, and latterly she was continuously a great invalid. This threw upon him a burden of daily nursing and household duty, to which, upon the top of his studies and his teaching, only a very strong man could have been equal, but which he shouldered with an unvarying fortitude and patience. His gentleness never failed; but in the last few years of her life (she died in January 1914) the strain was obviously telling on him. When it was plain that her end was near, his friends hardly knew whether the longer endurance of the strain or the agony of losing her would break him most. None who watched it closely will forget the depth of his devotion to her and to her memory. Not long after her death the mischief which proved fatal to him declared itself. He developed pernicious anaemia, but lingered for over a year. During this time, lying mostly in bed, he still worked privately with a few pupils, and even in the spring of 1915 came down to New College and delivered half a dozen lectures. He undertook, and made some progress with, the preparation for publication of Professor Ingram Bywater's papers, with whom he had been long united by close friendship and common interests. He also did a good deal, with his nurse's help, in the way of arranging his own papers. Almost until the last he retained his keen interest in his friends and studies and the events passing in the world; but he was unconscious for a few days before he died.

Such a life presents not many features of public interest. Wilson

took little part in University business. He was Proctor in 1885, and Public Examiner in Literae Humaniores in 1887; but he found the responsibility of deciding on men's classes so harassing that he held his office for only one year of its three years' term. At all times and in all matters he was incapable of doing things by halves. That had its advantages; as a school-friend already quoted[1] writes, 'Nothing depressed him, and no prospect of work appalled him, and hardly ever indeed proved too much for him'. It had also its ludicrous side, and its serious drawbacks. When he read a paper to some learned society, its length was apt to exceed the power of most listeners' attention; and the introductory matter alone would often occupy the evening. The same tendency led him in his lectures to elaborate a detail of subtlety which often tired his class, and in other connexions to waste energies that might have been better employed. This was especially so when he thought criticism, of himself or others, had been unjust. In his small tale of published matter are included a pamphlet, *On Military Cycling, or Amenities of Controversy* (1890), and another, of 145 pages, *On the Interpretation of Plato's Timaeus* (1889). The former was provoked by a review of his *Manual of Cyclist Drill for the Use of the Cyclist Section of the O.U.R.V.C.* (1889). For he retained in later life the enthusiastic interest in volunteering which he displayed at school, and compiled what was probably the first book on cyclist drill, insisting on the military value of cycling long before it was recognized by the War Office. And he defended himself against the reviewer of his manual with a fullness and an energy that the issue hardly deserved. The pamphlet on the *Timaeus* was a more serious matter. It arose out of an unfavourable review by him of R. D. Archer-Hind's edition of that dialogue in the *Classical Review*, wherein he more particularly complained that the editor had insufficiently acknowledged his obligations to Stallbaum and Martin. The editor made a contemptuous reply, which Wilson considered to evade his charge. The pamphlet which he produced in the ensuing six months, in order to justify his strictures, contains only a part of what he intended to publish; 'the parts which treat of the philosophy and what may conveniently be called the scientific subjects in the *Timaeus*' were never written, or at least never issued. But it is an astonishing example of wide and precise knowledge of his subject, and of close reasoning applied to the thought both of Plato and of his editors. It would be a pity to revive a dead controversy. Happier relations between Wilson and another editor of Plato are seen in Adam's edition of the *Republic*.[2] Wilson's indefatigable thoroughness was

[1] Mr. J. W. Sharpe.

[2] Vol. ii, p. 470 sq.

always at the disposal of his friends, even to the neglect of more important matters; and in this instance it has enriched a valuable book with a valuable appendix. 'I never knew Wilson to listen willingly to blame nor to contemptuous speech of anybody,' writes a friend,[1] 'nor would he use such speech himself, except for sins of philosophy or scholarship; and there he would break out and become violent, even were the matter but a Greek particle.' This tendency was reinforced, in the pamphlet on the *Timaeus*, by the belief that earlier editors had been unfairly treated and his own criticisms unfairly met. Of the same ready indignation at anything he thought unjust he gave evidence later in connexion with his old school, when he had become a Governor, and the local authority, which was taking over the government, seemed to him to be treating unjustly the then head master.

Justice and indefatigability in study are among the qualities which Plato looks for in the genuine philosopher. In several other respects as well Wilson satisfied Plato's exacting requirements. He was full of courage and high spirit, and at the same time one of the kindliest of men. His tastes were of the most temperate and simple. He took an unaffected pleasure in common things, and no social prejudices determined his interest in persons. In the pursuit of truth there was nothing, small or great, that he would willingly let go; and certainly he entered not ἀγεωμέτρητος within the portals of philosophy. He combined, in fact, in an unusual degree three qualifications for doing good work as a philosopher. He was a capital scholar, with a special knowledge of the thought and style of Plato and Aristotle. He was a competent and instructed mathematician, who, if he had not kept pace with the recent developments of mathematics, could at any rate grapple with the problems of its first principles.[2] And he was a clear and original philosophic thinker. He would follow an argument like a sleuth-hound, and delighted in exposing the sources and ramifications of error. In his lectures he was comparatively sparing of criticism, and seldom mentioned living men by name; but in private conversation, or in his informal instruction, he practised less restraint. It was here that his great gifts as a teacher showed to most advantage. He would take, in his informal instruction, what men thought simple questions, and show how much lay in their solution. His mind, said a pupil after one of these discussions, was like a vice; so hardly could slovenly thought or uncriticized phrase escape from the

[1] Mr. J. W. Sharpe.

[2] Mr. J. W. Sharpe writes that 'he could certainly have done plenty of original work in mathematics' if he had given himself to the subject.

tenacity of his attack. Much popular contemporary doctrine came under this examination; it is the more to be regretted that he published so few of his results. For it would have been of great value that he should have put his criticism in the best and a permanent form, and have submitted it to others for reply. Among logical and philosophical issues on which he was specially qualified to render service are the doctrines of the metageometricians, and of the mathematical logicians, like Mr. Bertrand Russell in this country, whom Henri Poincaré called logisticians. From time to time in lectures or letters or conversation he dealt with these, but not so that they or the public could consider his strictures. Similarly, in his course on Logic he used to submit to a very searching criticism the doctrine of judgement associated with the names of Mr. F. H. Bradley and Dr. Bosanquet.

During the last few years of his life he did indeed put into print large portions of his Logic Lectures. A collation of the printed text with a student's manuscript notes of 1907–8 shows how much his thought was developing to the end. He printed partly for his students' sake, because the course had grown beyond what he could deliver in the year, partly to assist his own self-criticism; and he hoped by printing but not publishing to retain full freedom of modification. In a preface inserted in some copies of one of the parts, for distribution to a few friends, he gives an interesting and characteristic justification of this procedure. 'Those of my colleagues', he writes, 'who were kindly anxious that I should publish my lectures years ago—one of them, to whom my obligations are infinite, at last proposing to see them through the press himself without giving me any kind of trouble—will be, I am certain, well content now that I did not comply with their wishes. I really felt that there was too much of what required a more thorough treatment; and this uneasiness has had time to develop into (I think) a clearer consciousness and to produce considerable changes in the old matter as well as additions to it.*

'There is a greater danger of fixing one's thoughts by publication, and arresting one's own progress, than is generally recognized. I have often noticed that quite able thinkers have the greatest reluctance in retracting anything to which they have committed themselves by publication, though the mistake may be perfectly obvious to the critic (whose work is incomparably the easier), and the author could only

* 'In A. E. W. Mason's novel *The Turnstile* there is a trenchant passage on the anxiety of politicians to prove that they have never changed their opinions, which exactly expresses my own feeling about a similar tendency in philosophy.'

gain by admitting it. But the (printed) letter killeth, and it is extraordinary how it will prevent the acutest from exercising their wonted clearness of vision.

'I remember that once when I had been pointing out to an intelligent pupil the very palpable contradictions in a book by a certain popular philosopher, I was amused to be met by the question, quite sincerely put, "But why didn't somebody tell him?" The obvious mistakes had indeed remained unaltered in various editions, but young students probably have no idea of the power of what one may call "the obsession of print", the effects of which are not confined to philosophical writing.

'I hope, by my present method, to gain that greater clearness which is usually the result of printing for others to read, and at the same time to preserve the comparative freedom one enjoys as long as one's thoughts are only in manuscript.

'I hope, also, it will enable me at least—for I dare not count on more—to remain nearly as amenable to reason as if I had printed nothing.

'Of one thing I am fairly sure, and that is, that I shall want to revise both these pamphlets and the others which I have printed: while it is fairly probable, and certainly desirable, that several stages yet may precede publication, if I ever publish at all.'

Whatever the force of these considerations, it is a thousand pities that Wilson did not live to complete this δοκιμασία, and proceed to publication. Though there are nearly 300 pages of the print, and a further portion of the course exists in type-script, final revision is lacking, and reply to criticism now impossible. These lectures, however, will, it is hoped, be published; and there are other remains, type-written or in manuscript, which may be available. His papers include much work on hyperbolic geometry, which he sought to overthrow by the discovery of internal contradiction. In the opinion of his mathematical friends, this endeavour offered little prospect of success, and probably a more important line of attack on non-Euclidean geometries is developed in his lectures 'On Hypothetical Thinking', where he examines the relation of imagination to thinking, and the nature of genuine and of problematical or hypothetical conception, and argues that the only genuine conception of space which such geometries use is still the Euclidean. A type-written copy of a good note-book version of these lectures exists. So also does the manuscript of two public lectures on Symbolic Logic. These deal with nothing much later than the theories of Boole and Venn, which they examine with great acuteness. Their general conclusion is that

the equations by which that Logic represents premisses, and with which it works, all involve a simple predicational form, and upon this predicational element the forms of inference expounded rest. 'The equational element is not employed at all. The element is not only surplusage but incorrect, and if developed leads to contradictions, and to the destruction of the calculus altogether. The predicational element is correct, and the argument is sound because depending on this alone, and in no way involving the erroneous part. The equational form then is a mere sham; to get at the truth we must strip it away and fall back on the simple form of predication, and what we strip away is not only useless but wrong.' Into the doctrines of the 'logisticians' it is to be feared he never entered exhaustively on paper, though he had at one time intended to deal with Mr. Bertrand Russell's Logic, the paradoxes of which he regarded as akin to those of the Megarian eristic, and as springing largely from an uncritical use of symbols. The following argument is condensed from a paper, dated 1902–3, 'On the paralogism that the class of classes is a member of itself'. The fallacy arises, Wilson urges, from making the class of classes *a* class. *A* class is a totality of units connected by a common principle. The several classes *A*, *B*, *C* are each a totality connected by a special principle α, β, γ, which is not mere 'classness'. *X*, the class of classes, is simply *the* totality of all those totalities. There cannot be other such totalities; but if we call it *a* totality, it appears to be co-ordinated with those, and they and it to be connected by the common principle of 'classness'. It cannot, however, really be a part of the totality which it is. By the same verbal tricks it might be shown that the class of all polygons is a member of itself. For the pentagons, the hexagons, &c., are each a class of polygons; and the totality of these classes is a class of polygons; hence, like them, it is a member of the class of polygons, i.e. of itself. Moreover, we may develop against the paradox the argument of the τρίτος ἄνθρωπος. Let the classes *A*, *B*, *C*, &c., be each a class$_1$, and the class of classes be class$_2$; if then class$_2$ is a class like any class$_1$, there will be a class containing it and them, a 'class of classes and the class-of-classes', which we may call class$_3$. Similarly there will be a class$_4$ containing classes$_1$, class$_2$, and class$_3$, and so *ad infinitum*.

Besides the writings already referred to, Wilson published separately only his *Aristotelian Studies: I*, being a small volume *On the Structure of the Seventh Book of the Nicomachean Ethics, Chapters I–X*, which appeared in 1879 and was reissued in 1912: his inaugural lecture of 1889 on 'An Evolutionist Theory of Axioms' (to wit, on Herbert Spencer's), which was reprinted in 1912: a memoir of David Binning

Monro, Provost of Oriel, in 1907: and a book *On the Traversing of Geometrical Figures*, in 1905. The last arose out of his interest in the 'four-colour problem' in maps. He was, however, a fairly constant contributor to learned periodicals, such as the *Classical Review* and *Classical Quarterly*, the *Journal of Philology*, the *Academy*, the *Transactions of the Oxford Philological Society*, the *Archiv für Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie*, and the *Philologische Rundschau*. These papers are chiefly on the problems of text, interpretation, or doctrine in Plato and Aristotle; but a few concern other classical authors, one is a review, and one an obituary notice of his old head master, the Rev. Walter Clark. Some years ago he consented to allow the lectures which, before becoming Professor, he used to give on Plato's *Republic* to be reproduced from notes, and circulated in type-written copies; and he revised the proof of these, though he did not give them literary form. One or two copies of a short but valuable course on Aristotelian Logic were made in the same way. And among his remains, which, owing to the claims of other work during the war, have not yet been fully examined, are papers on the existence of God, on the conception of life, on Homer, on Greek musical modes, on Greek tactics, on the ὑποζώματα of Greek ships and the beaks of triremes, on universals, and on the good will. The last two were written for the British Academy; but neither was ever completed or presented. Most, if not all, are unrevised or fragmentary, and some perhaps fanciful. But the list will illustrate the direction of his interests.

Doubtless Wilson's main work was done in Logic. It has been already mentioned that he was revising and developing it to the last. In his earlier years he would have called himself an idealist. From this position, or at least from any easy or ordinary form of it, he gradually moved away. He insisted that it is involved in the nature of knowledge, that the being of what is known is independent of our knowing it; that knowing is not making; and that there can be no theory of knowledge (nor yet of perception either); for 'apprehension itself is obviously ultimate. Everything we can say about it, or indeed about anything else, presupposes it.' No study of the forms of thinking can 'be in the way of either doubting or establishing their validity. For in such an examination Logic would have to presuppose the validity of what it would be criticizing.' Logic can only disentangle the universal form from the particulars in which it is manifested. Some parts of Logic, therefore, are very simple. But the truth often has to be recovered from the incrustations of erroneous theory, and it needs very careful statement. In particular, it is

important to recognize the limits to defining. We are apt to be imposed upon by specious phrases that can only be interpreted through what they profess to explain. We cannot define knowing, and it is imposture to disguise the fact by using a term like cognition; but we can recognize its nature in examples. Similarly, we cannot define judgement; and when it is said to be a reference to reality, if we ask what kind of reference, the only answer is, the reference that there is in judging. The same tendency which leads men to offer as definitions what are not such leads them also to a pretended reduction of irreducible differences. Knowledge and opinion are improperly unified under the title of judgement. There are forms of thinking which are not knowing; they are unified by their relation to knowing, but not by reduction along with it to a common genus. What has concealed from logicians the heterogeneity of the forms of thinking which they have attempted to deal with together is the identity of the propositional form in which they are expressed. 'The logic which in modern phrase is to be a logic of judgement is, quite unconsciously, a logic of statement.' This view Wilson developed only latterly with full emphasis. The section which, as recently as 1907–8, was headed 'Theory of Judgement' is headed in print 'Of Statement, and its Relation to Thinking and Apprehension (subjects comprised under the traditional title of "the theory of judgement")'. Great attention is paid to the true meaning of different forms of statement; the inadequacy of the symbolism which reduces all propositions to the form '*A* is *B*' or '*A* is not *B*' is exhibited; for the form of thinking is different for example in 'Men are fallible' and 'Men are animals'. Wilson could have done first-rate work in philosophical grammar. Again, the true basis of the logical distinction between subject and predicate is laboriously examined, and it is shown to lie in the movement of the thinker's interest. The same form of statement may be used when this is different, and you cannot determine the meaning of a statement without regard to what a speaker would express through accent, accent being as much a part of our means of expression as words, or rather as the other characters of words. Thus the lectures were often concerned with what might be called grammatical discussions, and again with metaphysical; and grammar and metaphysics are not Logic. Wilson takes great pains to discover the proper province of Logic. In a very valuable introduction he examines the way in which a particular science or branch of study develops; not starting from a general definition, but from particular problems, between which an affinity comes later to be recognized. And whatever is required for the solution of these problems, though it may be ἄλλης

σκέψεως, belongs to the inquiry. Inference, however, seems to be pre-eminently the subject of Logic, because all inference is knowing. For there is no real inference which is not self-evident, or in which we do not know the connexion of premisses and conclusion. Unfortunately the treatment of inference in the lectures is not so full as he might have made it; but there are important discussions on syllogism, which is shown to be no more than a particular sort of calculus, and on induction, and on mathematical thinking.

The above is no more than an indication of the general position which Wilson took up, and of some of the doctrines which he expounded. It should be added that the lectures, and indeed all his work, are written in language singularly simple. Abstract and bald or unadorned the discussions indeed are, and they would be improved by more frequent concrete illustration, such as might have been supplied orally, or in a published book; but there is a resolute avoidance of technical terminology. In this he followed Plato rather than Aristotle. He had a great respect for the unconscious logic of common language, and never thought it waste of time to ask what the ordinary forms of speech imply, though he did not deny that they might on occasion embody erroneous doctrine. But what is clearly thought, it seemed to him, can be simply expressed. And nothing was more valuable in the discipline of his instruction than the way in which, as one of his most intimate pupils has put it, 'he was always pricking some bubble of language or thought', and implanting 'a cultivated distrust of phrases and formulae'.[1] There is much philosophic writing which seems to develop the consequences of some accepted terminology with little regard to the facts that the terminology is supposed to cover; and a sort of mythology results, wherein disputants seek consistency as the mythologists sought to introduce it into the accounts of the doings and relations of the gods; but they were gods whom men had created. In Wilson's estimation, this was in philosophy as the sin of witchcraft. He sought the truth for himself in independent scrutiny of facts. Others also no doubt endeavour this. But the language of many men's philosophies is as it were a veil before our eyes, through which the sight can with difficulty pierce. It was Wilson's singular merit, that his vision could not only pierce with greater penetration than most other men's, but also that he made his pupils realize the difficulty and necessity of the task, and even taught them to perform it with better success.

H. W. B. JOSEPH.

[1] Mr. S. Ball, in the *Oriel Record*, reprinted in the *Oxford Magazine*, Oct. 22, 1915.