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SAMUEL ALEXANDER

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IN Samuel Alexander, who died on September 13th, we have lost the thinker who, since the death of F. H. Bradley in 1924, has been the leading figure in British philosophy, and whom all schools, whatever their differences, have delighted to honour as their chief. Closely united with Bradley as one of "those from whom he learned most," and as himself for eleven years Fellow of a neighbouring College in Oxford, he developed a philosophy which in its starting point, method, and apparent results was poles asunder from that of his teacher. Yet it would be strange if two men who both inherited the same great European tradition, and pursued what they conceived of as its inner significance with the same absolute sincerity of purpose and the same talent, amounting to genius, for speculation should have been so wide apart from each other as the letter of their teaching seemed to indicate. Alexander might not perhaps have been willing to ask, as Whitehead does, whether "the type of thought involved (in his own metaphysics) be not a transformation of some main doctrines of Absolute Idealism on to a realistic basis,"¹ but I believe it could be shown to be true that by a kind of "meeting of extremes in contemporary philosophy," different from that which Bosanquet had in mind in his book with that title, these two philosophers stand for different perspectives of the same world: the one starting from the axiom that "if you would see a thing as it truly is you must watch it in its beginnings," the other from the opposite "if you would see the reality of a thing you must see it in the light of what it aims at becoming;" the one meaning by reality that which is actual, the other that which is ideal; the one

¹ Preface to *Process and Reality*, p. vii.

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emphasizing existence, the other value, as the clue to the truth of the universe. If this or anything like it be true, what these two leading thinkers have left to the coming generation is not so much a choice between two diverse philosophies as a call to the task of uniting what is true in each in a more truly "synthetic philosophy" than Herbert Spencer was able in his time to achieve. It is hoped that the present article may be followed by others in the same journal in which in the different departments of philosophy something of this kind may be attempted. It has seemed, however, to the editor that any such articles should be preceded by a more general one on Alexander's life and work as a whole, and he has asked me to undertake it. If old acquaintance, dating from 1878, when, coming from Australia, he won his Scholarship in Baliol for a like excellence in Classics and Mathematics, and admiration for a life as lovely in its entire unselfishness and unworldliness as in its devotion to truth, as he saw it, were sufficient qualifications for the task, I might have more confidence in my ability to perform it. It is another thing to hope that, in the bare outline which alone is possible in a single article, anything like justice can be done to the immense scope and statuesque completeness of the work he has left behind him, and to the debt which not only our own generation but others after us will always owe to it, and I am full of diffidence of my power to do what is required of me.

Alexander has himself indicated two different ways of approaching a great philosopher¹—one, "the study of his precise teaching, setting it in relation with his age"; the other, that of inquiring what he "can teach us in our present problems." But there is a third which, while not without reference to the former of these at the beginning and to the latter at the end, should occupy itself in the main with the steps by which he arrived at the great generalizations that he sought in his chief work to expound. It is this, as more suited to my own turn of mind, that I propose to adopt. If I venture, with still greater diffidence, to add a reference to certain difficulties, which one approaching these problems from a different point of view still feels about the letter of his work, it will be with the view of justifying what I have just said of it as a perspective which requires to be supplemented rather than superseded. In itself it may still be possible to say of it, *stat mole sua*.

Though, by his own work and that of others, the terms "realist" and "idealist" have largely ceased to form any clearly dividing line between different schools, there remained in the formative period of Alexander's thought a fairly definite distinction between those who approached philosophy from the point of view of a human

¹ *Spinoza and Time*, p. 19.

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experience everywhere interlaced and, in its higher forms, dominated by ideas in a way that separated its method from that of the empirical, and particularly the physical, sciences, and those who approached it from the side of the latter, and conceived of philosophy as consisting in only a wider application of the same method, differing chiefly from the special sciences by the inclusion of the elementary "categorical" forms that run like a warp beneath the woof of experience in every field. It had been the unfortunate legacy of the Kantian philosophy to treat these forms, of which substance, causality, universality are the chief, along with extension in time and space, as contributions of the mind, and so to make every object into which they enter mind-dependent. Idealism was burdened with this tradition, and formed a challenge to a realism that was prepared to treat these, along with everything else that could be made the object of contemplation, as empirically given. Whether Alexander ever accepted the Kantian form of idealism I do not know, but his whole bent of mind was against it, and the historian of the time¹ is within his right in classing him with the writers who, in the book with that title, represented the "New Realism." "The temper of Realism," Alexander himself wrote in 1914, "is to de-anthropize, to order man and mind to their proper place among the world of finite things: on the one hand to divest physical things of the colouring they have received from the vanity or arrogance of man, and on the other to assign them, along with minds, their due measure of self-existence."² He was careful, however, to add in the spirit of that "natural piety"³ which he held to be the mark of the true investigator: "Realism strips mind of its pretences, but not of its value." It was this, along with a profounder acquaintance with the history of philosophy, that distinguished him from some of the writers just mentioned and made him reject with growing decisiveness the extremist view which was prepared to treat consciousness as merely "a cross-section of the external world," and so to lapse into "behaviourism." While in its appeal to non-empirical elements, such as he conceived Green's "eternal self" and Bradley's "Absolute" to be, idealism required a wholesome lowering, the new realism called for an equally wholesome raising of its temperature.

This attitude is already clearly manifest in his first book, *Moral Order and Progress*, published in 1889. It was based on the essay for which he obtained the Green Moral Philosophy Prize in 1887 upon the subject, "In what direction does Moral Philosophy at the

¹ E.g. Rudolf Metz in his *Hundred Years of British Philosophy*.

² "The Basis of Realism," *Proceedings of the British Academy*.

³ *Space, Time and Deity*, ii, p. 47. Elsewhere he speaks of it in another mood as that "deliberate innocence," that "strenuous naïveté" which was the chief qualification of the philosopher.

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present time seem to you to admit or require advance?" By this time Spencer's *Data of Ethics* was already in its fifth edition, and Leslie Stephen's *Science of Ethics* had followed on the same general evolutionary lines. From his study of these writers Alexander "had come to the ideas borrowed from biology and the theory of evolution, which are prevalent in modern ethics." But he had come to them also "with a training derived from Aristotle and Hegel," and claimed that what he had found was "not antagonism but, on the whole, fulfilment."¹ It was this training that enabled him to go beyond at once Spencer's mechanical treatment of society as an aggregate of individuals and Stephen's idea of the "social tissue," while remaining true to the realistic spirit of both these writers.

The first part, on Moral Order, is a modern version of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, interpreted in terms of an "equilibrium" established, on the one hand, between the individual and the society with which he is organically connected and, on the other, between his own instincts, desires, and interests. The second and more original part, on Moral Progress, is an application of the doctrine of evolution in a field where the struggle for survival is no longer between individuals and groups, terminating in the physical extinction of one or other of them, but between ideals, with all that this implies in the gradual and peaceful victory of those which are more in harmony with the needs of a truly social life.

On re-reading the book to-day one is struck by the anticipation we find in it of all that the writer taught us to look for in his work: the learning so lightly borne, the power of expression and of finely chosen, often humorous, illustration, the scrupulous fairness to opponents, finally, the sense of the limitations within which his own conclusions held. Whatever we may think of the adequacy of the formula of "equilibrium" and of "social," or what Bergson calls "closed," morality to cover the full scope of moral goodness, the book stands along with Green's *Prolegomena* and Bradley's *Ethical Studies* as the high-water mark of nineteenth-century Oxford thought in this field.

While he had become convinced from the side of ethics, as Bradley in those same years had come to be from the side of logic, that neither of these studies could be pursued with success apart from a sound basis in metaphysics, Alexander was aware that problems still awaited him in psychology and the theory of knowledge the solution of which must supply further data for such an advance. For some twenty-five years accordingly we find him occupied with a series of papers on these subjects, in every one of which he may be said to have broken new ground by his insistence on

* Preface, p. viii.

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a thoroughgoing empiricism. It would be tiresome to enumerate them; but one or two are of particular interest as anticipations of his later metaphysical doctrines.

He was one of the first to see the importance that was coming to be attached to the idea of Value, and his article upon it in *Mind* of January 1892 formed a transition from his empirical treatment of moral values to a similar treatment of value in general. He is still occupied mainly with the moral ideals interpreted as "nothing but the formulations of desires" and "but forms of healthy social life," but he recognizes that there are other kinds of value, namely, aesthetic and scientific, which admit of being treated on the same basis in reply alike to hedonist, intuitionist, and rationalist theories. However closely related to metaphysics the corresponding sciences are as furnishing further data for it, his method removes them from its domain and classes them as "the last or psychical class of the natural sciences." He was to return to all three with new clues to their nature in the light of his own metaphysics. Meantime his interest centred in psychology and epistemology in preparation for a higher flight.

It was, so far as I know, in his contribution to the Symposium in the Aristotelian Society on "The Nature of Mental Activity" in 1908 that he first announced the view that mind or consciousness consisted essentially in activity or conation, and that what were commonly treated as the objects or "contents" of consciousness, whether sensations, perceptions, images, or conceptions, are in fact physical objects, part of the real world, entirely independent of mind. The conation differs according to the nature of the object, colour, figure, etc., but "consciousness is one and the same thing working only in different directions." When we try to make our idea of it more definite and explicit, "it is always referred to brain." In other words, "consciousness or mental activity can never be a presentation": "I cannot attend to my attention as I attend to what I write." He had not yet arrived at the distinction between the object as something "contemplated," the activity as something "lived through" or "enjoyed," still less at an answer to all the questions which are thus left over to be settled by metaphysics; but it is easy to see that we have here the foundation of everything that was to come.

The article in the same journal of the next year contains a further explanation of what is meant by "direction" ("consciousness exists in space just as greenness is spread over a leaf"), together with an application of the doctrine to willing and the problem of universals. With regard to the will, his comment upon Bradley's view of it as "the self-realization of an idea" is that in an act like that of lifting the arm "in nine cases out of ten there is no image of the arm

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being lifted, but only a felt direction, as yet disconnected with the system of mental movements which is the consciousness of present reality." "The fiat of the will, which some writers love to regard as mysterious, is nothing but the snapping together of the temporarily imperfect and disconnected system with the general trend of the mind's activity." With regard to ideas or universals, again starting from Bradley's doctrine of them as inseparable from reality but as having a psychical existence, Alexander appeals to a greater authority than his: "Unless Plato has lived and written in vain, why should not ideas be realities?" What is true of the universal in things is true (again *pace* Bradley) of the universal we call the "self." There is no continuity between myself and the part of it we isolate as an object to it (e.g. an idea which it has) "in the sense in which there is continuity between my different mental actions." Throwing down the gauntlet to the whole idealist epistemology, he declares that it is only "because subject and object are supposed to constitute an experience, to make that unity within duality which alone is real, that we are disposed to accept the proposition that a part of the self may become a not-self and be turned into an object to the self from which it is cut off."

The challenge was not long in being taken up. In a paper at a following meeting of the Aristotelian Society, G. F. Stout, whom Bosanquet in those days called "our one psychologist," on the subject "Are Presentations Mental or Physical?" sought to show the deep line of division between presentations such as we have in sense-perception, in memory, or in dream images, and the physical objects which they represent. Stout did not deny that conation and feeling were underlying elements in all mental existence, but he contended that there were "certain existents so connected with conation and feeling as to form with these part of the simple system which we call an individual mind."¹

In his reply in the following number of the same journal, in a paper on "Sensations and Images," Alexander admitted that he had gone beyond his record "in calling all objects of cognition physical": "The vital question is whether they are independent of mind." But he was still prepared to insist that *sensa* and images (as distinguished from seeing or imagining) are physical in the sense of having the characteristics of physical objects, and to drive the doctrine home by what seemed a greater paradox still, namely, that "perceiving a thing means that mind and the thing are together in the same sense as the table and the floor are together." That is not to say that there is not a personal element in experience, as is shown in illusion and error. But this means merely that "inappropriateness in the action of the mind distorts its vision of things.

¹ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1908-1909, p. 241.

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The man who is in error is wry-necked." He is "thrown" like Janet in Stevenson's story, and the object of Science and Philosophy, as Plato said long ago, is to twist him round so that he can see. The illusion is a partial appearance which, though not "true," is nevertheless "real."

In these articles the lists were set for a tournament which has lasted to the present day. Meantime opposition and criticism only stimulated Alexander to the further development of his own thesis. What strikes one in looking through these and the succeeding articles is the sureness and rapidity with which he advanced along his chosen road. In that on "Self as Subject and as Person"¹ he rejects all doctrines that appeal to a "pure" or "timeless self." The self is "thoroughly empirical and yet, though it is so, it is rightly called 'I,' because it is not an 'object' experienced but an 'experiencing' experienced." "It is enjoyed or suffered, but it is not revealed to itself, it is not contemplated." If we try to contemplate it, we find that it is not the mental self we are contemplating, but the complex of neural activities, of which mind is the "effluence." He has, however, so far advanced on his former view as to recognize other features in the activity besides direction, namely, duration and succession, degrees of intensity, a variable toning of pleasure and pain, and emotional excitement. He admitted the difficulty of treating these last as objective. "If anyone chooses to maintain that they are the varying qualities of consciousness, I have as yet no answer to give." So far as I know, it was not till he came to write the section on Feeling in *Space, Time and Deity*² that he renounced the view hitherto shared with Stout that pleasure and pain are modalities of conation, and boldly announced that they are "objective experiences of the order of organic sensations."

The paper in the *British Journal of Psychology* of the same date as the last-mentioned, on "Foundations and Sketch-Plan of a Conational Psychology," is chiefly interesting as showing what he might have done had he chosen psychology instead of metaphysics as his subject in the coming years. How strongly his mind was by this time bent, and how far it had already proceeded in the latter direction, we can see from the article which has the leading place in *Mind* of 1912, on "The Method of Metaphysics and the Categories." After repeating what he had already said of mind, he uses it to exclude two principles of method: first, the principle that other things depend on it (in other words, idealism), and secondly, the principle that mind is co-extensive with physical things (in other words, pan-psychism). From this he goes on to define metaphysics in distinction from the particular sciences as "the attempt to describe the ultimate nature of existence and the pervading charac-

¹ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1910-1911.

² Vol. ii, p. 132.

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ters of things," a definition which he holds is "sufficiently near to that of Aristotle to be regarded as identical with his." But, though thus distinguished from Science in the extent of the matter with which it deals, its method is the same: "through and through empirical." It takes existence and its pervading characters as given entirely independently of mind, either as a contributor or as a constituent. So far from being either, mind is only one among other things so given—albeit "endowed with the highest quality we are aware of," and thus "the most gifted individual in a democracy of things," the summit of a hierarchy of levels each of greater complexity of structure than that which goes before it but founded upon it. To this apparent commonplace of observation his distinction between the contemplated and the enjoyed enables him to add that, while each higher can enjoy its own form of existence, it can only contemplate itself in terms of the level below it, the living in terms of physical and chemical matter, the mental in terms of the living organism. If there are higher beings than human minds (as we may well believe there are, or are coming to be), minds will be there for them to contemplate "spread out in space and occurring in time, just as we see vital processes in a plant occurring in space and time," while they will enjoy a form of being of their own the nature of which we can only vaguely anticipate. Again it is easy to see that in all this we have the first sketch of the argument of his great book, the subject of which is further anticipated at the end, when he puts to himself the "old question of the nature of being itself. Is time, for instance, the real tissue of things? Or space? Or both? . . . What the enumeration of the categories is?" Finally, as there is no identical quality which belongs to all things in the same sense as they are all in the "infinite foundations" of space and time, "it would be the business of a profounder study than this to explain the secret of the breaking up of the whole continuum into these 'finite centres' of existence."

It was these questions that were to occupy Alexander during the immediately succeeding period. Whether he would have been stirred to carry out this formidable programme in anything more than isolated studies like those just mentioned is a question. At times he would complain of his own laziness and inertia, perhaps not unconnected with the feats of physical energy he displayed in those days on his bicycle. Certainly the social and political disturbances of the time might have formed sufficient excuse for the indulgence of such a weakness. Fortunately, the invitation in the middle of the War to deliver the Gifford Lectures at Glasgow came as the strongest incentive to adopt a wider plan, in which the various strands of his thought as hitherto developed should be woven

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together into a single pattern. The result was given to the world in 1920 in his great book on *Space, Time and Deity*, to take its place beside Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* and one or two others as a landmark in the history of latter-day metaphysical philosophy in England. Much of it was already familiar to those who had followed the previous development of his thought. But even in this there was no mere repetition of what he had already written. Everything was recast to fit into the new mould, and came with a freshness derived from the new context. The features that were distinctively new were the doctrine of the unity of Space and Time as comparable to that of body and mind,¹ which occupies so large a portion of the first volume, and the doctrine of Deity as a quality of the universe which has still to "emerge," which occupies the latter part of the second.

It would lead me too far to attempt to condense the difficult arguments by which Alexander sought to establish these doctrines, still more to attempt any criticism of them. It will be sufficient to recall the respects in which they came as a challenge to both the current idealism and the current realism. The first challenged the criticism of idealists by its apparent attempt to find the secret of the universe in the earliest, most abstract, and empty form of unity, that of space and time, instead of in the latest, the most concrete and the fullest, as we have it, in the mind-discovered worlds of science, history, art, morality, and religion. The second challenged the criticism of realists by the flight it seemed to take from the solid ground of space-time existence into the azure of an unexperienced and to us inexperienceable quality called Deity. It was while his book was being assailed by this cross-fire of criticism that Alexander once ruefully complained to the present writer of his failure to have found any important following. But this was to forget that a philosopher, more than anyone else, casts his bread upon the waters in the hope of finding it after many days; and that, in any case, his success is to be measured not by the number of his disciples, but by the sincerity and consistency with which he has sought to apply some single great principle to throw light on the world of experience. As the Scottish philosopher Ferrier long ago said, "It is more important that a philosophy should be reasoned than that it should be true." If any was ever reasoned from the foundations, it was Alexander's.

With regard to the truth of it I will venture only on one remark, and that in the form of a question following on what I said at the beginning. Bradley, in his last years, is said to have been visited by misgiving as to his own entire consistency. This is a wholesome

¹ Time in Alexander taking the place of thought or idea in Spinoza as the other known "attribute" of Substance.

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visitation, even when it may be too late to remedy the fault. I do not know whether Alexander, with all his modesty, ever seriously confessed to one of the same kind. Yet if he had done so, might there not have been some ground for it, in view of the at least seeming inconsistency of seeking the matrix of everything that is in the empirically, or, as he preferred to say, intuitively, given fact of existing Space-Time, and yet endowing this with a *nisus* to ever higher forms of being, each of which takes up and gives meaning to that which went before—in a certain sense (to use a phrase of his own in speaking of human imperfections) “redeems” it?¹ It may be a misnomer to speak of this *nisus* as the purpose of a creator embodied in the world, but does it not bear a strong family resemblance to the transformation which things undergo, according to Bradley, in the Absolute, and may it not be legitimately read as another example of how in the great dialectic movement of thought which we call philosophy “the incensed points of mighty opposites” may bear in themselves the promise of their reconciliation?

After the main harvest of his long sowing had been reaped in 1920, Alexander lived long enough to glean a still rich aftermath in the indulgence of the interest he shared with so many of the younger generation in the theory of art. No one can read even the most technical of his writings without being struck with the fineness of their literary expression. His own outlook on life may be said to have been that of the artist. He had the poet's love of “all things both great and small” in nature and human life. His heart went out to birds and dogs, to children, and to the subtler, more humorous and lovable traits of men and women.² Deprived by his life-long deafness of the full enjoyment of the freedom of human intercourse and of music, he found his chief resource in literature.³ In his frequently solitary walks it was his habit to carry a book of poetry with him, and to employ himself in committing favourite passages to memory.⁴ It was, therefore, no surprise when in his later life he became engrossed with the problem of the nature of Beauty.

¹ *Space, Time and Deity*, ii, p. 421.

² There is doubtless a record in Manchester University of the words in which as “public orator” he introduced the recipients of honorary degrees. Nothing that he has written would more vividly illustrate this charming feature of the man.

³ Among his lesser writings are “Molière and Life,” “The Art of Jane Austen,” “Pascal the Writer,” to be found in the *John Rylands Library Bulletin*, 1926 and following.

⁴ One of my own liveliest reminiscences of him was once in Edgbaston in the twilight before the lamps were lit, when it was suggested that he should recite some poetry to us, and he unhesitatingly responded with long passages from Shelley in the rich tones of his beautiful voice.

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He had already, in *Space, Time and Deity*, dealt with it in conjunction with those of truth and goodness under the head of "Tertiary Qualities," where, to the surprise of some of his readers, he had seemed to abandon his realistic basis by treating it as a character which "the external thing receives from its connection with mind."¹ The explanation was that the development of his "conational" psychology had given him a new point of view from which value in general could be treated as issuing from the demand to satisfy fundamental impulses when these reach a certain degree of consciousness, and the objects towards which they are directed are sought for their own sakes. Each of the so-called values has a nature of its own according as the impulse is to be satisfied: in the case of truth, by the exclusion of personal elements and submission to the teaching of things; in the case of practice, by the adaptation of things to human needs; in the case of beauty, by the infusion of new meaning into things as objects of impassioned contemplation. In all cases these qualities appear, in contrast to the primary and secondary, as a joint product of mind and object. It was this doctrine that had been applied in his book; but there was much left over to say about them, and particularly about beauty. True, natural beauty seemed to offer a difficulty, and in discussing it Alexander is apt to use words reminiscent of ordinary realism, as when he distinguishes it from artistic beauty and claims for it that it "is presented to us ready made for inspection, or rather for discovery: our hands or voices have had no part in fashioning it."² But in *Beauty and Other Forms of Value*,³ published in 1933, he leaves no doubt as to his view, namely, that "the beautiful, whether in art or nature, is of course a reality. It is not mere physical (or human) reality because it mixes the mind with the physical or, it may be, human topic which suggests it. But being an amalgam of two real things, the one physical and the other mind, the product is also real and has its own autonomous reality." Why, he elsewhere asks, should that which is the product of two things that are real be itself less real on that account? To which our reply would be, "Why indeed?" but further to ask whether on this principle we might not here again find a ground of reconciliation between heated opposites in the long, by this time somewhat wearisome, discussion of the objective reality of empirical qualities, including space and time themselves, by taking them, as Meredith in the *Ode to Colour*, which Alexander delighted to quote, took them, if not mind-created, yet as much spiritual as physical.

¹ Vol. ii, p. 293.

² *Art and Instinct* (Herbert Spencer Lecture, 1927).

³ P. 143. Cp. "Artistic Creation and Cosmic Creation," p. 12, Herz Lecture, *John Rylands Library Bulletin*, 1927.

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As a member of the great Jewish community, Alexander would have been false to that profound interest in religion and the destiny of man, of which it is the historical representative, if he had not had the bearing of his philosophy on these subjects constantly before him. In his first book he mentions them at the end, only to postpone the fuller treatment of them as belonging to metaphysics. He returns to them in the last two chapters of his second book. On the problem of human destiny, his view of the organic connection between mind and body forbade him to entertain any idea of immortality in the sense of individual survival. But his doctrine of the universe as groaning and travailing for the revelation of a Deity, which is "on the side of goodness,"¹ brought him very near to the conception of the fatherhood of God: "On the one hand, we finites reach out to God, who is the goal of our desires; on the other hand, God, who is sustained by us, meets us with support and 'the solution of our uneasiness,' " in what theologians have called "grace and redemption or forgiveness of sins."²

In the course of his life Alexander was loaded with honours. Besides receiving honorary degrees from six universities, he was a Fellow of the British Academy, an Honorary Fellow both of Baliol and Lincoln College, and in 1930 he received from the King the Order of Merit. In the obituary notice in *The Times* it was reported of him that he once remarked: "I may be wrong in the way I see the fact, but if they inscribe on my cinerary urn *Erravit cum Spinoza* I am well content." If we would not inscribe that upon it, we might well inscribe instead *Ut alter Spinoza philosophatus*.

¹ *Space, Time and Deity*, ii, p. 413.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 398-9.