CHAUNCEY WRIGHT.[1]

THE sudden and untimely death of Mr. Chauncey Wright in September, 1875, was an irreparable loss not only to the friends whose privilege it had been to know so wise and amiable a man, but to the interests of sound philosophy in general. To some, perhaps, there may seem to be extravagance in speaking of any such loss to philosophy as irreparable; for in the great work of the world we are accustomed to see the ranks close up as heroes fall by the way, and when we come to reckon up the sum of actual achievement, in our thankfulness over the calculable results obtained we seldom take heed of those innumerable unrealized possibilities upon which in the nature of things we can place no just estimate. Of course it is right, as it is inevitable, that this should be so. There is, however, a point of view from which it may be fairly urged that the work which rare and original minds fall short of doing because of straitened circumstances or brevity of life does never really get done at all. Something like it gets performed, no doubt, but it gets performed in a different order of causation; and though there may be an appearance of equivalence, the fact remains that, from the sum of human striving, an indefinite amount of rich and fruitful life has been lost. True as this is in the case of exact science, it is still more obviously true in speculative science or philosophy. For the work of a philosopher, like the work of an artist, is the peculiar product of endless complexities of individual character. His mental tone; his shades of prejudice; his method of thought, — are often of as much interest and value to mankind as any of the theories which he may devise; and thus it not seldom happens that personal familiarity with the philosopher is itself a most instructive lesson in philosophy.

[1] *Philosophical Discussions.* By CHAUNCEY WRIGHT. With a Biographical Sketch of the Author by Charles Eliot Norton. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1877. 8vo.

In the case of Chauncey Wright, none save the friends who knew the rich treasures of his mind as shown in familiar conversation are likely to realize how great is the loss which philosophy has sustained in his death. For not only was he somewhat deficient in the literary knack of expressing his thoughts in language generally intelligible and interesting, but he was also singularly devoid of the literary ambition which leads one to seek to influence the public by written exposition. Had he possessed more of this kind of ambition, perhaps the requisite knack would not have been wanting; for Mr. Wright was by no means deficient in clearness of thought or in command of language. The difficulty — or, if we prefer so to call it, the esoteric character — of his writings was due rather to the sheer extent of their richness and originality. His essays and review-articles were pregnant with valuable suggestions, which he was wont to emphasize so slightly that their significance might easily pass unheeded; and such subtle suggestions made so large a part of his philosophical style that, if any of them chanced to be overlooked by the reader, the point and bearing of the entire argument was liable to be misapprehended. His sentences often abounded in terse allusive clauses or epithets which were unintelligible for want of a sufficient clew to the subject-matter of the allusion: in the absence of an exhaustive acquaintance with the contents of the author's mind, the reader could only wonder, and miss the point of the incidental remark. Of such sort of obscure, though pregnant, allusion we have an instance in the use made of the conception of a "spherical intelligence" in the essay on "The Evolution of Self-Consciousness," where the brief reference to the Platonic Timæus is by no means sufficient to relieve the strain upon the reader's attention. It is this too compact suggestiveness which makes this remarkable essay so hard to understand, and the exuberance of which half tempted Mr. Wright to give to the paper the very esoteric title of "The Cognition of *Cogito*." A writer who kept the public in his mind would not proceed in this way, but would more often give pages luminous with concrete illustrations where Mr. Wright only gave sentences cumbrous with epigrammatic terseness. If Mr. Wright did not keep the public in mind while writing, it was not from the pride of knowledge, for no feeling could have been more foreign to him;

and there was something almost touching in the endless patience with which he would strive in conversation to make abstruse matters clear to ordinary minds. It was because, as a writer, he thought in soliloquy, using his pen to note down the course of his reasoning, but failing to realize the difficulty which others might find in apprehending the numerous and far-reaching connotations of phrases to him entirely familiar.

It was only some such circumstances as these, joined to a kind of mental inertness which made some unusually strong incentive needful to any prolonged attempt at literary self-exposition, that prevented Chauncey Wright from taking rank, in public estimation, among the foremost philosophers of our time. An intellect more powerful from its happy union of acuteness with sobriety has probably not yet been seen in America. In these respects he reminds one of Mr. Mill, whom he so warmly admired. Though immeasurably inferior to Mill in extent of literary acquirement, he was hardly inferior to him in penetrating and fertile ingenuity, while in native soberness or balance of mind it seems to me that Wright was, on the whole, the superior. In reading Mr. Mill's greater works, one is constantly impressed with the admirable thoroughness with which the author's faculties are *disciplined*. Inflexible intellectual honesty is there accompanied by sleepless vigilance against fallacy or prejudice; and while generous emotion often kindles a warmth of expression, yet the jurisdiction of feeling is seldom allowed to encroach upon that of reason. Nevertheless, there are numerous little signs which give one the impression that this wonderful equipoise of mind did not come by nature altogether, but was in great part the result of consummate training, — of unremitting watchfulness over self. Some of his smaller political writings and the "Autobiography" entirely confirm this impression, and show that in Mr. Mill's mind there were not only immense enthusiasms, but even a slight tinge of mysticism. All the more praiseworthy seems his remarkable self-discipline in view of such circumstances. Mr. Wright, though so nearly in harmony with Mr. Mill in methods and conclusions, was very different in native mental temperament. An illustration of the difference is furnished by the striking remarks in which Mr. Mill acknowledges — in common with his father — a preference for the experience-philosophy on

utilitarian grounds: it obliges men to try their beliefs by tests that are perpetually subject to criticism, and thus affords no room for doctrines which, by reason of some presumed sanctity, men may find an excuse for trying to impose on one another. That there is profound truth in this no one can deny; but prejudice and partisanship are liable to grow out of any such practical preference for a given form of philosophy, and one cannot readily imagine Mr. Wright as influenced, even slightly, in his philosophic attitude by such a consideration of utility. His opinions were determined only by direct evidence, and to this he always accorded a hospitable reception. A mind more placid in its working, more unalloyed by emotional prejudice, or less solicited by the various temptations of speculation, I have never known. Judicial candor and rectitude of inference were with him inborn. On many points his judgment might need further enlightenment, but it stood in no need of a rectifying impulse. No craving for speculative consistency, or what Comte would have called "unity" of doctrine, ever hindered him from giving due weight to opposing, or even seemingly incompatible, considerations. For, in view of the largeness and complexity of the universe, he realized how treacherous the most plausible generalizations are liable to prove when a vast area of facts is to be covered, and how great is the value of seemingly incongruous facts in prompting us to revise or amend our first-formed theories.

With these mental characteristics Mr. Wright seems to have been fitted for the work of sceptical criticism, or for the discovery and illustration of specific truths, rather than for the elaboration of a general system of philosophy. As our very sources of mental strength in one direction may become sources of mental weakness in another, as we are very likely to have what the French would call "the defects of our excellences," so we may perhaps count it as a weakness, or at least a limitation, in Mr. Wright that he was somewhat over-suspicious of all attempts at constructing ideally coherent and comprehensive systems. That there is coherency throughout the processes of Nature he would certainly have admitted, in so far as belief in the universality of causation is to be construed as such an admission. But that there is any such discernible coherency in the results of causation as would admit of description in a grand series of all-embracing

generalizations, I think he would have doubted or denied. Such denial or doubt seems, at least, to be implied in his frequent condemnation of cosmic or synthetic systems of philosophy as metaphysical "anticipations of Nature," incompatible with the true spirit of Baconism. The denial or doubt would have referred, it is true, not so much to the probable constitution of Nature as to the possibilities of human knowledge. He would have argued that the stupendous group of events which we call the universe consists so largely of unexplored, or even unsuspected, phenomena that the only safe generalizations we can make concerning it must needs be eminently fragmentary; and if any one had asked whether, after all, we have not great reason to believe that throughout the length and breadth and duration of the boundless and endless universe there is an all-pervading coherency of action, such as would be implied in the theorem that all Nature is the manifestation of one Infinite Power, — to any such question he would probably have held that no legitimate answer can be given.

In this general way of looking at things we have the explanation of Mr. Wright's persistent hostility to the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. This hostility is declared in his earliest essay, entitled "A Physical Theory of the Universe," and it is maintained in the paper on "German Darwinism," published only three days before his death, wherein great pains are taken to show that Mr. Spencer's philosophy is utterly un-Baconian and unscientific, as resting, not upon inductive inquiry, but upon "undemonstrated beliefs assumed to be axiomatic and irresistible." In the first and last of my many conversations with Mr. Wright — in July, 1862, and in July, 1875 — I found myself charged with the defence of Mr. Spencer's philosophy against what then seemed, and still seems, to me a profound misunderstanding of its true character and purpose. As the point is one which goes as far as any other toward illustrating Mr. Wright's philosophic position, and as it has an immediate bearing on the vexed question of science and religion, I will crave the reader's indulgence while I illustrate it briefly here.

Doctors are proverbially known to disagree, whether they be doctors in philosophy or in medicine; but I have often thought that an interesting case might be made out by any one who should endeavor to signalize the half-hidden aspects of agreement

rather than the conspicuous aspects of difference among philosophic schools. Certainly, in the controversy which has been waged of late years concerning the sources of knowledge and the criterion of truth, one is inclined to suspect that a greater amount of antagonism has been brought to the surface than is altogether required by the circumstances. In old times, when you were asked why you believed that things would happen in future after much the same general fashion as in the past, there were two replies which you could make. If you were a believer in Locke, you would say that you trusted in the testimony of experience; but here the follower of Leibnitz would declare that you were very unwise, since experience can only testify to what has happened already, and, so far as experience goes, you haven't an iota of warrant for your belief that the sun will rise to-morrow morning. Your trust in the constancy or Nature must be derived, therefore, from some principle inherent in the very constitution of your mind, implanted there by the Creator for a wise and beneficent purpose. Once this transcendentalist argument was thought to have great weight, but of late years it has fallen irredeemably into discredit. For to-day the empiricist retorts with crushing effect that, precisely because we are wholly dependent on experience and have no other quarter to go to for rules of belief and conduct, we cannot apply to the future any other rules of probability than those with which our experience of the past has furnished us. If we had any criterion of belief independent of experience, then we might perhaps be able to believe that on the earth a million years hence, or on Mars to-day, a piece of red-hot iron would not burn the hand. Were we not strictly hampered by experience, we might doubt the universality of causation. But being thus strictly hampered, we must either imagine the future under the same rules as those under which we remember the past, or else subside into a kind of mental chaos and form no expectations whatever. To this view of the case transcendentalism has as yet made no satisfactory rejoinder.

Our faith in the constancy of Nature results, therefore, from our inability to overcome or "go behind" the certified testimony of experience. Such is the primary psychological fact, about which there is no reason to suppose that Mr. Wright and Mr. Spencer would disagree. But this, like many other facts, has two

sides; or, at least, there are two possible ways of interpreting it, and here arises the misunderstanding. On the one hand, our belief in the constancy of Nature may be the result of an immense induction or counting up of the whole series of events which show that Nature is not capricious; or on the other hand it may be the generalization of a simple assumption which we make in every act of experience, and without which we could not carry on any thinking whatever. The first alternative is the one defended by Mr. Wright in common with Mr. Mill, while the second is the one more prominently insisted upon by Mr. Spencer. To me it seems that Mr. Spencer's view is the more profound and satisfactory; but I fail to see that there is necessarily any such antagonism between the two as is implied in recent controversies on the subject. On the other hand, it seems clear to me that the two views are simply two complementary aspects of the same fundamental truth. At first sight it may seem very bold to assert that in every act of our mental lives we make such a grand assumption as that of the constancy of Nature; but it is very certain that, in some form or other, we do keep making this assumption. Every time that the grocer weighs a pound of sugar and exchanges it for a piece of silver, the practical validity of the transaction rests upon the assumption that the same lump of iron will not counterbalance one quantity of sugar to-day and a different quantity to-morrow; and a similar assumption of constancy in weight and exchangeability is made regarding the silver. The indestructibility of matter and the continuity or persistence of force are taken for granted, though neither the grocer nor his customer may have received enough mental training to understand these axioms when stated in abstract form. Nay more, though they may be superstitious men, believing in a world full of sprites and goblins; though they may be so ignorant as to suppose that, when wood is burned and water dried up, some portions of matter are annihilated, — yet, in each of these little practical transactions of life, they go upon the same assumption that the philosopher goes upon when, with his wider knowledge and deeper insight, he rules out the goblins and declares that no matter is ever destroyed. Without this assumption in some form we could not carry on the work of life for a single day. The assumption, moreover, is absolutely unconditional:

no occurrence ever shakes our reliance upon it. I set my clock to-day, and depend on its testimony to-morrow in starting on a journey: if I miss the train, I may conclude that the clock was not well regulated, or that it has begun to need cleaning; but it never occurs to me that my confidence in the mechanical laws of cog-wheels and pendulums has been at all misplaced.

This universal and unqualified assumption of the constancy of Nature is, in a certain sense, a net result of experience, inasmuch as we find it tested and verified in every act of our conscious lives. Acting on the principle that "a pound is a pound, all the world around," we find that our mental operations harmonize with outward facts. Doubt it, if we could, and our mental operations would forthwith tumble into chaos. Experience, therefore, — by which is meant our daily intercourse with outward facts, — continually forces upon us this assumption. Along with whatever else we are taught about ourselves and the world, there comes as part and parcel the ever-repeated lesson that the order of Nature may be relied on. In this sense the belief may be said to be a net result of all our experience.

But this is by no means an adequate account of the matter. The case has another aspect, to which neither Mr. Mill nor Mr. Wright has done justice. How can the constancy of Nature be said to be proved by experience, when we begin by assuming it in each of the single acts of experience which, taken together, are said to prove it? Does not this look like reasoning in a circle? We are told that the constancy of Nature is proved for us by an unbroken series of experiences, beginning with our birth and ending with our death; and yet not one of this series of experiences can have any validity, or indeed any existence, unless the constancy of Nature be tacitly assumed to begin with. It is the balance, we are told, which assures us that no particle of matter is ever lost; but in weighing things in a balance we must take it for granted that the earth's gravitative force is uniform, — is not one thing to-day and another to-morrow; nay, we must also assume that the present testimony of our senses will continue to be consistent in principle with their past testimony. Whatever system of forces we estimate or measure, in support of our implicit belief in the constancy of Nature we must sooner or later appeal to some fundamental unit of measurement which is

invariable. Without some such constant unit we cannot prove that the order of Nature is uniform: but we cannot prove the constancy of such a unit without referring it to some other unit, and so on for ever; while to assume the constancy of such a unit is simply to assume the whole case.

It would seem, therefore, that our belief in the trustworthiness of Nature is not properly described when it is treated simply as a vast induction. It should rather be regarded as a postulate indispensable to the carrying on of rational thought, — a postulate ratified in every act of experience, but without which no act of experience can have any validity or meaning. It is for taking this view of the case that Mr. Spencer is charged with rearing a system of philosophy upon "undemonstrable beliefs assumed to be axiomatic and irresistible." Considering that the undemonstrable belief in question is simply the belief in the constancy of Nature, one would be at a loss to see what there is so very heinous in Mr. Spencer's proceeding, were it not obvious that we have here struck upon a grave misconception on the part of Mr. Wright. Misled, no doubt, by some ambiguity of expression, Mr. Wright supposed Mr. Spencer to be laying down some everlasting principle, of universal objective validity, and quite independent of experience. To do this would undoubtedly be to desert science for metaphysics; but Mr. Spencer has not done any thing of the kind. As I said before, there has probably been an excess of controversy on this point. For my own part, without retreating from any position formerly taken,[1] I should be willing, for all practical purposes, to waive the question altogether. Whether our belief in the uniformity of Nature be a primary datum for rational thinking, or a net result of all induction, or whether, with the authors of the "Unseen Universe," we prefer to call it an expression of trust that the Deity "will not put us to permanent intellectual confusion," — whichever alternative we adopt, our theories of the universe will be pretty much the same in the end, provided we content ourselves with a simple scientific coördination of the phenomena before us. And this is all that has been aimed at in the attempt to construct a synthetic, or cosmic, system of philosophy. There has been no further

[1] "Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy," Part I, chap. iii; Part II, chaps. i, xvi.

transcending of experience than is implied in the assumption that the order of Nature is the same in the Pleiades and in the Solar System until we learn to the contrary; and it would be difficult to set aside Mr. Spencer's proceedings as un-Baconian without so drawing the line as to exclude Newton's comparison of the falling moon to the falling apple, — the grand achievement which first extended the known dynamic order of Nature from the earth to the heavens.

Our knowledge of the universe is no doubt well nigh infinitely small, — how small we cannot know. The butterfly sailing on the summer breeze may be no farther from comprehending the secular changes in the earth's orbit than man is from fathoming the real course and direction of cosmic events. Yet, if throughout the tiny area which alone we have partially explored we everywhere find coherency of causation, then, just because we are incapable of transcending experience, we cannot avoid attributing further coherency to the regions beyond our ken, so far as such regions can afford occasion for thought at all. The very limitations under which thinking is conducted thus urge us to seek the One in the Many; yet, if our words are rightly weighed, this does not imply a striving after "systematic omniscience," nor can any theistic conception which confines itself within these limits of inference be properly stigmatized as contrary to the spirit of science.

One of the most marked features of Mr. Wright's style of thinking was his insuperable aversion to all forms of teleology. As an able critic in "The Nation" observes, to Mr. Wright "such ideas as optimism or pessimism were alike irrelevant. Whereas most men's interest in a thought is proportional to its possible relation to human destiny, with him it was almost the reverse." But the antagonism went even deeper than this. Not only did he condemn the very shallow teleology of Paley and the Bridgewater Treatises, but any theory which seemed to imply a discernible direction or tendency in the career of the universe became to him at once an object of suspicion. As he was inclined to doubt or deny any ultimate coherency among cosmical events, he was of course indisposed to admit that such events are working together toward any assignable result whatever. From his peculiar point of view it seemed more appropriate to

look upon phenomena as drifting and eddying about in an utterly blind and irrational manner, though now and then evolving, as if by accident, temporary combinations which have to us a rational appearance. "Cosmical weather" was the tersely allusive phrase with which he was wont to describe this purposeless play of events, as if to liken the formation and dissipation of worlds to the capricious changes of the wind. So strong a hold had this notion acquired in his mind, that for once it warped his estimate of scientific evidence, and led him to throw aside the well-grounded nebular hypothesis in favor of the ill-conceived and unsupported meteoric theory of Mayer. In Mr. Wright's mind it was an insuperable objection to the nebular hypothesis that it seems to take the world from a definable beginning to a definable end, and such dramatic consistency, he argued, is not to be found amid the actual turmoil of Nature's workings. It would be improbable, he thought, that things should happen so prettily as the hypothesis asserts: in point of fact Nature does so many things to disconcert our ingenious formulas! To the general doctrine of evolution, of which the nebular hypothesis is a part, Mr. Wright urged the same comprehensive objection. The dramatic interest of the doctrine, which gives it its chief attraction to many minds, was to Mr. Wright *prima facie* evidence of its unscientific character. The events of the universe have no orderly progression like the scenes of a well-constructed plot, but in the manner of their coming and going they constitute simply a "cosmical weather."

Without pausing over the question whether dramatic completeness belongs properly to metaphysical theories only, or may sometimes also be found in doctrines that rightly lay claim to scientific competence, we may call attention to the interesting fact that Mr. Wright's objection reveals a grave misunderstanding of the true import of the doctrine of evolution in general, as well as of the nebular hypothesis in particular. The objection — if it be admitted as an objection — applies only to the crude popular notion of the doctrine of evolution, that it is all an affair of progress, wherein a better state of things (that is, better from a human point of view) keeps continually supplanting a less excellent state, and so on for ever, or at least without definite limit. That Mr. Wright understood the doctrine in this crude way was evi-

dent from the manner in which he was wont to urge his anti-teleological objection both in his writings and in conversation. In criticising the nebular hypothesis, for instance, he was sure to let fall some expression which showed that in his mind the hypothesis stood for a presumptuous attempt to go back to the beginning of the universe and give some account of its total past career in terms of progress. But the nebular hypothesis, as it is now held by evolutionists, does not make any such attempt at all. The nebular hypothesis traces, from indications in the present structure of the solar system, the general history of the process by which the system arose out of a mass of vaporous or nebulous matter. That process has been a species of evolution in so far as it has substituted a determinate and complicated for an indeterminate and simple arrangement; and in so far as it has resulted in the production of the earth or whatever other planet may be the abode of conscious intelligence, it has been a kind of progress judged with reference to human ends. But so far from this evolution or progress being set down as a universal or eternal affair, it is most explicitly regarded as local and temporary. Throughout the starry groups analogous changes are supposed to be going on, but at different stages in different systems, just as the various members of a human society coëxist in all stages of youth, maturity, or decline; while here and there are nebulæ in which the first steps of development have not yet become apparent, and circumstances can be pointed out under which one of these masses might now and then fail to produce a system of worlds at all. Not only is there all this scope for irregular variety, but the theory further supposes that in every single instance, but at different times in different systems, the process of evolution will come to an end, the determinate complexity be destroyed, and the dead substance of extinct worlds be scattered broadcast through space, to serve, perhaps, as the raw material for further local and temporary processes of aggregation and evolution. This view is held as scientifically probable by many who have not been helped to it by Mr. Spencer's general arguments; but whoever will duly study the profound considerations on the rhythm of motion, set forth in the rewritten edition of "First Principles," will see that it is just this endlessly irregular alternation of progress and retrogression, of

epochs of life with epochs of decay, which the doctrine of evolution asserts as one of its leading theorems. In this respect the accepted name of the doctrine, though perhaps not unfortunate, is but imperfectly descriptive, and is therefore liable to mislead. What the doctrine really maintains is the universal rhythmic alternation of evolution and dissolution, only that our attention is preëminently attracted to the former aspect of the twofold process, as that which is at present uppermost in our own portion of the universe. In no department of Nature, whether in the heavens or on the earth, in the constitution of organic life or in the career of human society, does the doctrine of evolution assert progress as necessary, universal, and perpetual, but always as a contingent, local, and temporary phenomenon.

But what better phrase could we desire than "cosmical weather" whereby tersely to describe the endlessly diversified and apparently capricious course of Nature as it is thus set forth in the doctrine of evolution? As the wind bloweth where it listeth, but we know not whence it came, nor whither it goes, so in the local condensations and rarefactions of cosmical matter which make up the giant careers of stellar systems we can detect neither source nor direction. Not only is there no reference to any end which humanity can recognize as good or evil, but there is not the slightest indication of dramatic progress toward any *dénouement* whatever. There is simply the never-ending onward rush of events, as undiscriminating, as ruthless, as irresistible as the current of Niagara or the blast of the tropical hurricane.

This is a picture which ought to satisfy the most inexorable opponent of teleology. For my own part, I can see nothing very attractive in it, even from a purely speculative point of view, though it is as striking a statement as can well be made of the meagreness of our knowledge when confronted with the immensity of Nature. The phrase "cosmical weather" happily comports with our enormous ignorance of the tendency of events. But as terrestrial weather is after all subject to discoverable laws, so to an intelligence sufficiently vast the appearance of fickleness in "cosmical weather" would no doubt cease, and the sequence of events would begin to disclose some dramatic tendency, though whether toward any end appreciable by us or not it would be idle to surmise.

In the discussion of such questions, called up by Mr. Spencer's philosophy, Mr. Wright always appeared in the light of a most consistent and unqualified positivist. He hardly could be called a follower of Comte, and I doubt if he even knew the latter's works save by hearsay. But he needed no lessons from Comte. He was born a positivist, and a more complete specimen of the positive philosopher has probably never existed. He went as far as it was possible for a human thinker to go toward a philosophy which should take no note of any thing beyond the content of observed facts. He always kept the razor of Occam uncased and ready for use, and was especially fond of applying it to such entities as "substance" and "force," the very names of which, he thought, might advantageously be excluded from philosophical terminology. Sometimes he described himself as a positivist, but more often called himself a Lucretian, — the difference between the two designations being perhaps not great. As a champion of Lucretius, I remember his once making a sharp attack upon Anaxagoras for introducing creative design into the universe in order to bring coherence out of chaos. What need, he argued, to imagine a supernatural agency in order to get rid of primeval chaos, when we have no reason to believe that the primeval chaos ever had an existence save as a figment of the metaphysician! To assume that the present orderly system of relations among things ever emerged from an antecedent state of disorder is, as he justly maintained, a wholly arbitrary and unwarrantable proceeding. No one could ask for a simpler or more incisive criticism upon that crude species of theism which represents the deity as a power outside the universe and coercing it into orderly behavior.

Although, like all consistent positivists, Mr. Wright waged unceasing war against Mr. Spencer's system of philosophy, there was yet one portion of the doctrine of evolution which found in him a most eminent and efficient defender. In spite of his objections to evolution in general, Mr. Wright thoroughly appreciated and warmly espoused the Darwinian theory of the origin of species by "descent with modifications." His most important literary work was done in elucidation and defence of this theory. Of all his writings, by far the clearest and most satisfactory to read is the review of Mr. Mivart's "Genesis of Species," which

Mr. Darwin thought it worth while to reprint and circulate in England. Its acute and original illustrations of the Darwinian theory give it very great value. The essay on phyllotaxy, explaining the origin and uses of the arrangements of leaves in plants, is a contribution of very great importance to the theory of natural selection. So, too, in a different sense, is the paper on the evolution of self-consciousness, which is the most elaborate of Mr. Wright's productions, but so full of his worst faults of style that, even after much cross-questioning of the author, I never felt quite sure that I had grasped his central meaning.

It was in such detached essays or monographs as these that much was to have been expected from Mr. Wright, especially in the application of Darwinian conceptions to the study of psychology. Could he have been induced to undertake an elaborate treatise, we should have seen the philosophy of Mill and Bain carried to its furthest development and illustrated with Darwinian suggestions by a writer not in sympathy with the general doctrine of evolution, — an interesting and instructive spectacle. But I doubt if Mr. Wright would ever have undertaken an extensive work. To sit down and map out a subject for systematic exploration would have been a proceeding wholly foreign to his habits. His thinking had that defect which we find in Schubert's music, — lack of artistic form, inability to bring up concisely when once set going. Once launched out on a shoreless sea of speculation, he would brood and ponder for weeks, while bright determining thoughts would occur to him at seeming haphazard, like the rational combinations of phenomena in his theory of "cosmic weather." To his suggestive and stimulating conversation this unsystematic habit gave additional charm. An evening's talk with Mr. Wright always seemed to me one of the richest of intellectual entertainments, but there was no telling how or where it would end. At two o'clock in the morning he would perhaps take his hat and saunter homeward with me by way of finishing the subject; but on reaching my gate a new suggestion would turn us back, — and so we would alternately escort each other home perhaps a dozen times, until tired Nature asserted her rights and the newly opening vistas of discussion were regretfully left unexplored. I never knew an educated man who had read so little, except Mr. Herbert Spencer; but, like

Mr. Spencer, whom he resembled in little else, Mr. Wright had an incomprehensible way of absorbing all sorts of knowledge, great and small, until the number of diverse subjects on which he could instruct even trained specialists was quite surprising. There were but few topics on which he had not some acute suggestion to offer: and with regard to matters of which he was absolutely ignorant — such as music — his general good sense and his lack of impulsiveness prevented his ever talking foolishly. This lack of impulsiveness, a kind of physical and intellectual inertness, counted for a great deal both in his excellences and in his shortcomings. His movements were slow and ponderous, his mild blue eye never lighted with any other expression than placid good humor, and his voice never varied its gentle monotony. His absolute freedom from egotism made him slow to take offence, and among the many accidents of controversy there was none which could avail to ruffle him. The patient deference with which he would answer the silly remarks of stupid or conceited people was as extraordinary as the untiring interest with which he would seek to make things plain to the least cultivated intelligence. This kind of patient interest, joined with his sweetness of disposition and winning simplicity of manner, made him a great favorite with children. He would amuse and instruct them by the hour together with games and stories and conjurer's tricks, in which he had acquired no mean proficiency.

Along with this absence of emotional excitability Mr. Wright was characterized by the absence of æsthetic impulses or needs. He was utterly insensible to music, and but slightly affected by artistic beauty of any sort. Excepting his own Socratic presence, there never was any thing attractive about his room, or indeed any thing to give it an individual character. In romance, too, he was equally deficient: after his first and only journey to Europe, I observed that he recalled sundry historic streets of London and Paris only as spots where some happy generalization had occurred to him.

But romantic sentiment, æsthetic sensitiveness, and passionate emotion, — these are among the things which hinder most of us from resting content with a philosophy which applies the law of parsimony so rigorously as to cut away every thing except the actuality of observed phenomena. In his freedom from all such

kinds of extra-rational solicitation Mr. Wright most completely realized the ideal of the positive philosopher. His positivism was an affair of temperament as much as of conviction; and he illustrates afresh the profound truth of Goethe's remark that a man's philosophy is but the expression of his personality. In his simplicity of life, serenity of mood, and freedom from mental or material wants, he well exemplified the principles and practice of Epicurus, and he died as peacefully as he had lived, — on a summer's night, sitting at his desk with his papers before him.

It is a bitter thing to lose a thinker of this mould, just in the prime vigor of life, and at a time when the growing habit of writing seemed to be making authorship easier and pleasanter, so that in years to come we were likely to have had even richer and brighter thoughts from the pen that must now for ever lie idle. The general flavor of Mr. Wright's philosophy — unsystematic, but fruitful in hints — may be gathered well enough from the papers which Mr. Norton has carefully collected in this memorial volume. But the best that can now be done in the way of editing will give but an inadequate impression of Chauncey Wright to those who have not listened to his wise and pleasant talk. To have known such a man is an experience one cannot forget or outlive. To have had him pass away, leaving so scanty a record of what he had it in him to utter, is nothing less than a public calamity.

JOHN FISKE.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN ETHICS.

IN what respect, if in any, does our knowledge of right and wrong differ from our other knowledge? Are the methods appropriate for obtaining information concerning the wickedness or righteousness of actions different from, or similar to, those adequate to acquaint us with the other qualities of things? Is there required, or does there exist, any separate means or specialized sense or faculty, differing in nature or function from the other senses, as the eye for instance differs from the ear, in order to enlighten us as to those characteristics of actions which denote goodness or badness? For the purpose of judging of the excellence of a man's life, is it necessary to refer to any criteria differing in kind, demanding different treatment, from those used in acquiring knowledge in any other branch of the inquiry after truth? Is the correctness of a proposition in ethics to be demonstrated by the use of any other mental powers than those called into action in substantiating any general statement in natural history or physics? Is the classification of actions into good and bad a process like, or unlike, that by which we classify animals or flowers or the inorganic substances? Why do we declare that a certain course of action is wicked? What makes it wicked, and not right? Upon what basis do we make the distinction? Is it some feeling or emotion? If this be so, what is the nature of this feeling; from what does it arise; and whence comes its binding force? Does this basis consist in some intellectual perception? Then, upon what qualities of things, or tendencies of events, does this perception rest, and in what manner does there follow from it a classification of acts into those that are good and those that are bad?

All these inquiries are only parts of another wider question, and the answers to them taken together form the complete an-