

Pension Luchesi Florence 16 Feb. 1885

135

Dear Friend,

Many thanks for the first volume of the "Lit. Tschden". The two now stand together as Lucida sidera on my shelves.

I am going to have my other copy bound and will give it to some English Platonist when I find one. Yes, you have made out what seems a very convincing case for Simon; I wish our London Justice had had your detective skill.

As regards what you say about the emptiness of Positivism, I have never understood whether you mean that the physical and social sciences ~~do~~ would do to speak dry up without a meta-physical root, or that science would not be worth cultivating or life living if we gave up transcendental speculation.

It seems to me that there is a great deal well worth studying in

The works of Comte Mill and Spencer  
whether one does or does not accept  
the restrictions which they impose  
on the human mind. In England  
and France spiritualistic metaphysics  
meant finding out a priori reasons  
for every antiquated abuse and  
every stupid prejudice. The new  
school of Oxford Hegelians have  
adopted a very different attitude  
towards the questions of the day; but  
then their attitude towards the  
Positivists is by no means one of un-  
compromising hostility. For myself  
I am not a Positivist in this sense  
that I do not acknowledge the  
existence of any insoluble problems  
in nature; only I cannot accept as  
satisfactory any of the solutions  
hitherto offered. I agree with those  
who hold that all existence is  
spiritual and that there is a  
fundamental unity in which all

spirits are contained - a fact testified  
to by the unity of our own conscious-  
ness, by the possibility of knowledge,  
and by the moral law. But I do  
not see any way to going any  
further than this at present.

In England all thinkers outside  
the Positivist camp seem now to be  
engaged in a line of speculation  
with which you sympathize, I believe,  
as little as I do - I mean what is  
called spiritualism, the endeavour  
to make out a direct communica-  
tion between mind and mind  
without the intervention of sensory  
and cerebral processes. Perhaps you  
have heard about the "Society for  
Psychical Research" established for  
this purpose. It eagerly collects in-  
formation about thought-reading  
apparitions spirit-drawing and  
mysterious communications from

The unscen of every description.  
I believe Ulrici and D. H. Michle  
is in for something of the same kind  
in Germany.

I am still studying the ancient  
history of the East but find little  
to interest me outside Palestine.

The winter here has been very  
changeable and unhealthy. I have  
had a cold for some days, but  
not enough to keep me in the  
house.

Ever sincerely yours

Alfred R. Benson

Pension Luccheri Florence Italy

8 Oct. 1885

136

Dear Friend,

Your last letter arrived a day or two after I had left Florence, but was forwarded to me in London where I spent half the summer. I congratulate you on the success of your speculations which prove you to be in more ways than one a worthy successor of Thales. But had there been a bar between England and Persia would you not have lost as much as you now have gained? I hope the summer has been fruitful, and that we shall soon see the application of your metaphysical principles to religion and morality, perhaps also to art. You must I should think have all the materials ready for a general history of philosophy (or better still of ideas) at least "in outline." London was less agreeable to me than Switzerland, but it gave me the opportunity of becoming acquainted

with several of our philosophical  
celebrities. Among these was Professor  
Henry Sidgwick of Cambridge certainly  
one of the ablest of living Englishmen,  
and distinguished both as a thinker and  
as a classical scholar. He spoke to me  
of your controversy with Zeller on the  
Platonic question, and showed considerable  
sympathy with your views so far as  
the order of the dialogues is concerned.  
"Fickmüller" said he, has the root of  
the matter in him; — a phrase rather  
reminiscent of Vera's neuf de la pierre.  
Accordingly I thought him a good subject  
for the spare copy of the Lit. Febd. which  
I had brought with me. He saw no  
difficulty in the view that Aristotle  
wrote his Ethics during the life-time  
of Plato. Which, he said, was the most  
likely subject for a young man to begin  
with. Sidgwick and some other  
Cambridge men have founded a  
Society for Psychological Research, so-called.

It has for its object the examination  
of all phenomena connected with  
Thought-reading, transference of sensations  
from one mind to another without the  
intervention of the physical organs, pre-  
sentiments, Will-power, Apparitions, and  
the like; something in short like  
Uriei and Fichte, though not exactly  
in the Spiritualistic interest, for they  
decline to pledge themselves to any  
hypothesis on the subject, although some  
of them seem inclined to invoke the  
aid of the luminiferous ether as the  
medium of transference. The Supernatural  
they decline to have anything to do with.  
Incidentally with these enquiries there  
is in England a movement in favour  
of Buddhististic Theosophy. The adepts of this  
school put forward pretensions so gross  
of the most extraordinary description  
which the Psychical Society refuse to admit,  
and I was present one evening at a  
very violent controversy between the  
two parties. The general public look

on both removed scepticism.

Afterward, I went to Scotland, a country which I had never visited before. It reminded me somewhat of Norway though on a smaller scale. At Edinburgh I saw Dr Hutcheson Stirling who first introduced the Hegelian philosophy into England - a hale hearty old man whose studies had evidently covered a very wide field. Do you know Max Duncker? I have read his Geschichte d. Alterthums so far as published. All about Greece seems very original and well done; the Hebrew history is strangely obsolete - at the standpoint of Ewald or little beyond it.

The subject of Biblical Criticism, Oriental languages, history of religion<sup>etc</sup> is almost infinite, and I almost regret having entered on it. But courage! something may come yet.

Yours ever

Alfred W. Benn