
The Philomathic Journal

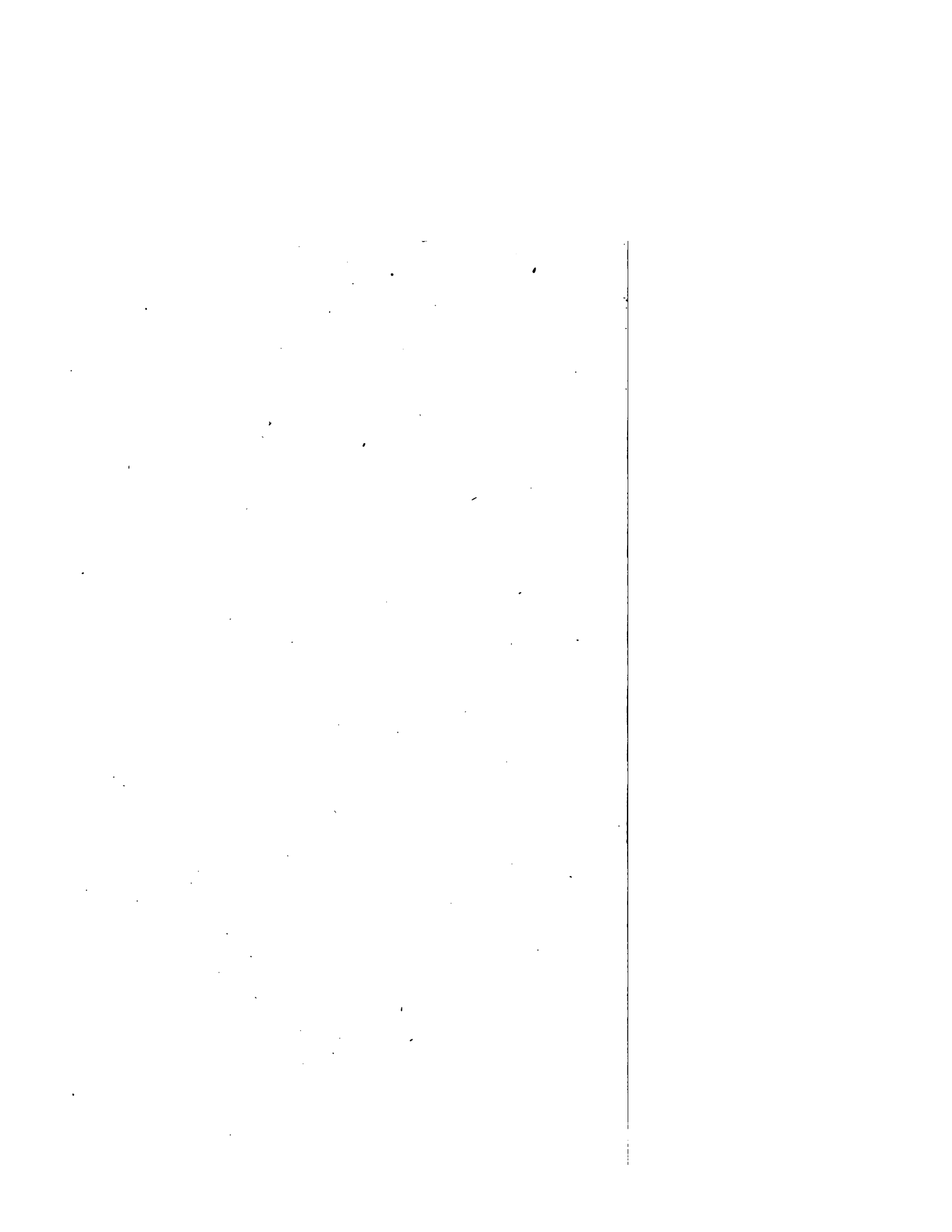
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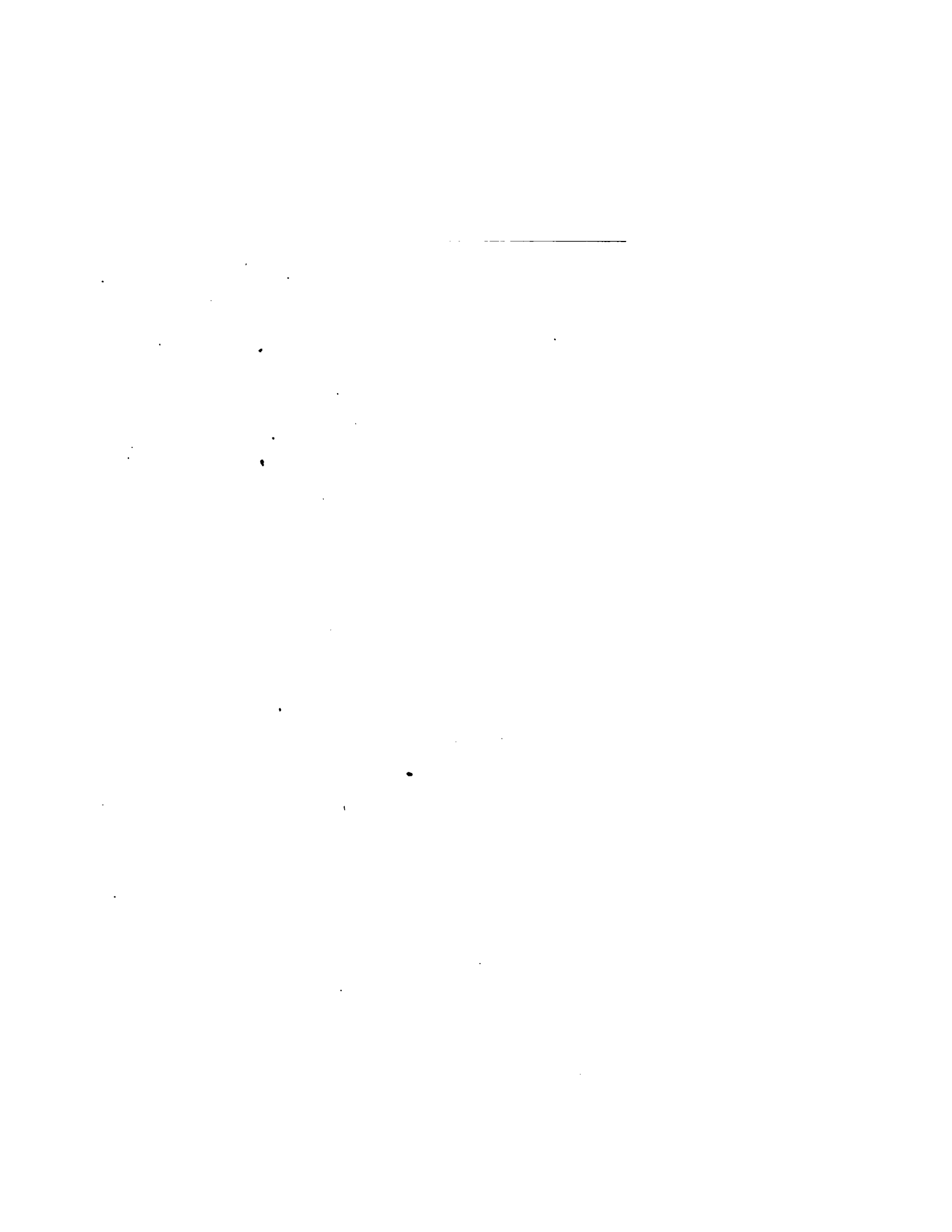
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*Discontinued after the present
Number.*

1827

THE
PHILOMATHIC JOURNAL,
AND
LITERARY REVIEW;

CONDUCTED BY

THE MEMBERS OF THE PHILOMATHIC INSTITUTION.

"WISDOM IS THE PRINCIPAL THING."

"Because the spirit of man cannot demean itself lively in this body, without some recreating intermission of labour and serious things,—*** civilize, adorn, and make discreet *the mind*, by the learned and affable meeting of frequent Academies, and the procurement of wise and artful recitations, sweetened with eloquent and graceful enticements,*** that the call of WISDOM and VIRTUE may be heard every where."—MILTON.

VOL. IV.

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J.R.



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THE
PHILOMATHIC JOURNAL.

JAN. 1826.

THE
SCIENCE OF ETHICS.

FOURTH LECTURE.

**ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BASIS OF MORALS—RELATION
OF BEING TO BEING.**

I HAVE no hesitation in admitting that I lay a greater stress upon the former, than upon the present, Lecture. I am less anxious to establish a system of my own, than to destroy the erroneous speculations of others; and this, from no disposition to undervalue the labours of those who have preceded me in the path of ethics, and who have, for the most part, written as wisely as ably upon morals; nor to gratify the poor triumph of exposing what is weak in other systems; but simply from the conviction which I sincerely entertain, that good and sound theories do less to promote the progress of the understanding, than bad or erroneous ones do to retard it; and that no general principle will be rendered practically effectual in the shape of mere system; it must be applied to actual circumstances, and to daily duties, as they arise in human life, and in all their variety of detail. Besides which, the principle of expediency, which I felt it necessary to combat and expose, and the aggregate of the arguments by which it has been defended, are in themselves so sophistical, and in their tendencies so extensively dangerous, that, if I succeeded at all in shewing the weakness of the one, and the hazard of the other; in pointing out the destructive issue to which they led, and the little support which they could derive from sound reason; I shall deem myself to have rendered some small service to the cause of morals; more especially, as these erroneous sentiments are the prevailing opinions of the day; or, at least, have been so popular during several years past, that there is scarcely any of the later theories of ethics which do

not directly or indirectly adopt them ; or which are not, however varied in form, founded upon a correspondent basis, regarding utility as the ultimate question.

The subject proposed for our present consideration, is *the establishment of the basis of morals*: in other words, it will be our business to ascertain the moral constitution of our nature. If we have not derived from nature a moral constitution, no reasoning can ever produce one: but, if we possess such a constitution, then the object to which our attention should be directed is, simply to determine its laws, and unreservedly to submit to its dictates. The faculties of man are not creative, their right direction is to explore and to combine. Our path is precisely the same in morals, as in every other department of science. We have merely to examine particular phenomena ; and, by a cautious induction from them, to establish general laws. This is all that we can do, and it is all that we ought to attempt to accomplish. We must bear in mind, therefore, at every step of our progress, that we are to inquire, not to prescribe. We are not to legislate for ourselves, but to ascertain what those laws are, which are clearly established ; and which, by the condition of our dependent being, we are bound to obey. I employ these terms now, as they open the way to the principle which I am about to propose. The language of nature is to be revered, not criticised ; and it is our province to interpret and to submit.

Natural philosophy was a confused mass of contradictions, until the investigations of those who studied her sublime laws were conducted on the principles of the logic of induction ; and we shall do nothing worth naming in morals, until we adopt the same plan. Those who have most contributed to develop nature, in all the character of her greatness—in all the endless variety of her forms—in all the infinity of her combinations—did not presume to lay down laws, and to bend her operations to their pre-conceived theories ; this was the wretched plan of the darker ages ; but true philosophy contemplated her in her own light, and sought out her hidden laws, by a scrupulous examination of her phenomena. In morals, also, if we will arrive at any safe conclusion, or secure any useful result, we must study with reverence and diligence the movements of Deity upon our own minds ; and, instead of prejudging the question, by fixing at random, or as caprice may suggest, upon a basis of ethics, upon which we attempt to erect a structure as fanciful ; or to imagine a law, and then bend all moral duty to it,—let us first examine the phenomena, and thence induce the principle. When Newton, by a patient examination of particular facts, discovered the universality of the law of gravitation, he submitted to it *as a fact*, without pretending to explain it ; and subsequently reasoned

from it the elucidation of new and untried phenomena. And when, by a similar process of careful investigation, we have ascertained the laws of the moral world, we must adopt the same course; we must be satisfied to submit to them as laws, and reason synthetically from them, to the discovery of our precise duties and obligations. The sublime and beautiful sentiment of the Psalmist should be ever present with us, alike in our examination of nature and of morals, to direct our search, and to conduct our labours to an useful, an honourable, a successful issue,—“With Thee is the fountain of life, and in Thy light shall we see light.”

We are not to form a splendid theory *a priori*, which has been the usual and popular method, and then proceed to support it by the most plausible arguments we can invent; but we are to examine facts in the first instance, and boldly reject every theory which is inconsistent with them. We must look for the basis of morals, not in the speculative theories of moralists, however illustrious their talents, however eminent their names may be,—we must not be seduced, or dazzled, by the glory irradiating the head of genius in ancient or in modern times; but we must seek this basis in the circumstances and in the nature of man,—in those facts which are disclosed to us by *observation* on the one hand, and *consciousness* on the other. These seem to be the most natural arrangements of our thoughts; because all our knowledge of the external world we derive from observation, and all our knowledge of our own moral nature is suggested to us by consciousness.

By *observation* we perceive the *Relation of Being to Being*. This I propose as THE BASIS of Morals. It is necessary to explain, that this term is employed with considerable limitations. I regard it only as the *foundation*, not as the *rule*,—the source of obligation, not the same thing with it; a rule only as applied to the formation of general conclusions, not to the casuistry of particular circumstances. It is the ground on which particular laws are rested, not qualified nor designed to supercede those individual regulations necessary to particular conditions. It is, in fact, rather the spring of information to the philosopher in his investigation of morals, than an absolute directory of human conduct. We are inquiring now, not so much what particular actions are right in any given situation, but why any actions are right, and others wrong, in all possible situations.

That our ethical conceptions depend upon *Relation*, is evident from the obvious fact, that, if there were no such relation, if one Being alone existed—the solitary occupant of the universe—there would be no moral duties. Truth, moral truth, would exist in the contemplations of the primeval, the