

A Conference

On the Work of the Scripps Institution.

The Company:

Joseph Le Conte,  
Wm. E. Ritter,                      Hosts.

Charles Darwin,  
William Wordsworth,  
Aligheri Dante,  
Aristotle the Stagirite,  
Jesus the Nazarene,  
K'ung Fu-tsze,                      Invited conferees.

Meeting Place: The seaward end of the wharf of the Scripps Institution for Biological Research of the University of California.

Members of the party scattered about unconstrainedly, seated on coils of rope, lobster traps and so on, or leaning against the "Ellen Browning", the dynamo house or other convenient objects, or strolling around examining the various appliances for scientific investigation.

Joseph Le Conte, taking his place beside the old iron winch used for hoisting the heavier boats onto the wharf, speaks:

"Friends of all ages and all the world: It falls to me, senior partner in the business of developing this department of the University of California, to welcome you here and to make you feel, as far as I may, the warmth of our gratitude for the eagerness with which you all accepted the invitation to come here and counsel with us in behalf of the work we are trying to establish.

"Asked to advise us here and now, because your teachings had long guided and inspired us, we had reason to believe you would be interested in our plans. But the sympathy and enthusiasm with which you responded to our invitation we had not anticipated. That this will mean almost as much to us as any specific words of wisdom you may speak, I hardly need tell you, who know human nature so well.

"A consideration that made us feel certain of your interest is the youthfulness and hence the pliability of the institution we are building. The lesson of the grain of mustard seed which one of you has made the world familiar with, has meant especially much to all in this company, I have no doubt.

"We feel the need of your counsel now because of the new and traditionally unsanctioned forward step we are contemplating in the development of our enterprise. The central hope of those whose name the foundation bears has ever been that their efforts may some time contribute largely to the practical realization by

*Return to  
Wm. E. Ritter*



mankind of that unity of all Life, which is the soul of the doctrines you have all set so masterfully before the world, each in his own particular way. They would help on the great task of so revealing to man his blood kindred to the whole living world that the revelation should enrich his spiritual life and promote his salvation in the present world and that which is to come.

"This purpose of theirs comes very near my heart because a main theme of my teaching since ~~the truth of~~ organic evolution became one of man's great possessions has been that this truth should be a corner-stone in whatsoever social and political and religious edifices man should erect.

"Since the practical work of shaping the Institution has fallen more directly upon my former pupil, now my colleague, Mr. Ritter, than on myself, so that his knowledge of details is greater than mine, I am now going to ask him to tell you more specifically what the conditions and purposes are, in order that you may counsel us the more understandingly."

Mr. Ritter, taking a place near Mr. LeConte, speaks:

"The harvest is white for the sickle, but the harvesters are few--the old story you all know so well.

"The bare intimation given you of our aims by Mr. LeConte is, I am sure, enough to secure your whole-hearted approval of the general plan. But it is as philosophers turned practical men for the time being that we now consult. Just how shall the few reapers with their meager reaping tools work, that the largest possible part of the rich crop may be secured? Just how and where shall our little leaven be placed that it may work to best advantage in the whole lump? Even though the spirit of truth be ours, the query still remains: Just what road leads the most directly and surely toward the possession of all truth?

"I am confident, friends, you will understand if I state our problem to you in the very same words in which we state it to ourselves. Seeing as we do that the whole truth concerning man is that he is at one and the same time a physical and a spiritual animal, and is a part of the vast system of nature, and is not, as some philosophers would make him, two independent beings, the one physical and the other spiritual, the two from their very nature at deadly enmity with each other, we see also that to biology, the science of life--of all life--must fall a share in the hard task of bringing about a reconciliation between these two parts of man.

"A biology of man in the fullness of his being there must be; and such foundations as this of ours, we recognize, are appointed by their very natures for leadership in such reconciliatory labor. Even though our narrow limitations as to funds and workers make it necessary ~~to~~ to limit narrowly our efforts, we still feel obliged to be up and at the great task, in however small a way. We must be doing something on human biology. What shall it be? Will any one of you volunteer to lead the way in advising?"

which you  
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Others  
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follow



Aristotle the Stagirite, with hardly an instant's delay, rises quickly and energetically from his seat on a lobster trap, and speaks:

"If my alacrity in responding to our junior host's request appears somewhat unseemly, I would justify it by the circumstance that in looking over this company I see that after Mr. Le Conte no one present has been quite so directly the teacher and predecessor of Mr. Ritter in his vocation as a naturalist as have I. For one thing I have experienced great delight on previous visits to this place in examining Mr. Ritter's collections of tunicates, the first one of which to be made scientifically known and to be named I had the honor of describing 350 years before the beginning of the Christian era.

"But this zoological kindred between Mr. Ritter and myself is by no means the strongest bond between us, warm and pleasant though it is, for conversations we have had together and manuscripts and printed writings of his which I have read have enabled me to see that in philosophizing about the world we have very much in common, this commonness consisting in what he, following still another more or less kindred soul, calls the natural history mode of philosophizing.

"Most of the works composed by me, and to which the world has given a large meed of honor, were produced in accordance with that method, as far as the store of natural history knowledge upon which I could draw permitted me to use it. But numberless discoveries of principle, and vast accumulation of fact have been made since that far-away time, so I now see many and grave defects in my handiwork.

"While the defects in my various treatises are many and diverse in character, the gravest of them are, I now see, all dependent on the fact that when I wrote them science had done exceedingly little toward finding out the exact qualitative and quantitative relations among the myriads upon myriads of visible objects which constitute the marvellous world in which we live.

"I saw very clearly, as I hope you all know who have read my treatises, that the parts which make up any whole in living nature are what they are largely because they belong to that whole. The whole is in large measure the causal explanation of its parts. But what was impossible for me to see when I was working, is the mighty scope of this truth and exactly how it applies in many realms, particularly in the realm of human life.

"The defectiveness, as I now realize, of my teachings under this last specification, is what leads me to the suggestion I am going to make for work in human biology which this Institution might undertake.



"When I worked out my ideas on Politics the knowledge of the human race was so meager, and civilization was so narrowly limited, that I was led into the terrible error of believing the State to be the highest independent association, or unit, or "Whole" to which man belongs, and which exists for his good; and of supposing the Greeks alone to be capable of true civilization.

"My views that 'man is a political animal', as I expressed it, and that the 'State is a natural institution', have been proved by all later experience to be correct. Following my usual natural history mode of analysis, to-wit, passing from the whole (the State in this case) to parts of the whole, I was able to point out many things about human relationships in the home, in industry, in economics, in government, in martial affairs, in education, in the upbuilding of noble lives, and the realization of happiness, that no one before me had seen clearly. But as already intimated, it is revealed to me now that I fell into the grievous error of supposing the State to be the highest Unity for human welfare. That I should have been led to this false conclusion is especially distressing to me in that various European peoples have followed me, even to this day, with consequences which I could not imagine, much less believe. Some of you may recall my saying, 'Nature has endowed Man with arms which are intended to subserve the purposes of prudence and virtue but are capable of being wholly turned to contrary ends.' It never occurred to me when I gave expression to this perception that the direst calamities would be brought upon the peoples of Europe by the acceptance of my doctrine of the State as man's supreme Good, and the practical attempt to enforce that doctrine through just such perversion as I saw to be possible of the militant endowment conferred upon man by Nature.

"As I now know the Unity still higher and still more natural (if the comparative degree is allowable for what is natural) than the State, and with which my analysis of man as a political animal should have begun, is the zoological species Homo sapiens."

(At this point Mr. Darwin, who is leaning on the rail and up to this time has been apparently rather more interested in the gulls flying about, a school of porpoises playing in the surf, and so forth, than in the discussion, manifestly receives a check to the wandering of his attention. The name Homo sapiens used by Aristotle to designate man catches the undivided interest of this naturalist.)

Aristotle continues:

"That this higher Unity of man <sup>ought to</sup> ~~should~~ have been the starting place for my analysis has been made known to me through two sources particularly, which though not altogether unknown to me formerly were yet wholly unappreciated as to their full scope and content.



"These knowledges relate to the kindred there is among all human beings whatever on the spiritual side of their natures, first taught, it seems, though not very definitely, by our co-adviser Confucius, and first brought to sharp and compelling expression by our other co-advisor, Jesus the Nazarene.

"The other knowledge referred to has as its main fountains workslike those of still other laborers, Carolus Linneus and Charles Darwin particularly. From such labors we perceive that in their bodies as well as in their spirits all men are so close of kin that such terms as fraternal and brotherly may in scientific strictness be applied to the relation.

"You probably begin to see now, friends, what my proposal is to be. I suggest that this Institution of research in biology—of professedly unrestricted inquiry into the nature of all life—shall take as its first step in human biology the task of re-analyzing man the political animal in accordance with the principles of analysis clearly recognized and as far as possible followed by me, but beginning with the natural history species Homo sapiens as the highest biotic unity, and so the highest political good of man, instead of with the State, as I did. I suggest that an outline of a polity for the human species be drawn up.

"I make this proposal the more earnestly and confidently in that my discussions with our hosts, especially with our junior host, and my examination of their writings published and unpublished, have convinced me that they are in better state than any one else to be charged with leadership in the task."

With this Aristotle resumes his seat and a moment's silence ensues. Then, slowly letting himself down from his seat on the dynamo box, Mr. Ritter speaks:

"Although this suggestion thrown out by my old teacher and professional companion overcomes me almost, yet I frankly own it does not greatly surprise me; for as he has told you, the personal discussions we have had on these great matters in later years have had the effect of illuminating both our minds as to whither the world's civilizations (note, I do not say civilization, for in reality there have been several of them of prime importance) have been tending; as to what the situation touching these civilizations is today in the world as a whole; and as to the intimate bearing my own work and ideas have on this situation, even though at their inception, and along most of the way, I was quite oblivious of this bearing.

"Before making any further answer to the suggestion, I greatly hope other members—all the other members, indeed—of the company will comment on the suggestion."



After a brief interval during which glances are passed among those who have not yet spoken, Dante arises and speaks:

"As a philosopher in very truth—as one, that is to say, who is a lover of all wisdom—but as one who has chosen the poet's rather than the scientist's method of teaching his fellows, though I am eager to declare my interest in all that has been spoken to-day, I yet confess to misgivings concerning the proposal made by my neighbor and teacher, Aristotle.

"That I have felt, even from bitter experience, the need of a higher and wider political unification of man than existed when I was producing my laborious works, and that I saw, in vision at least, that such a consummation awaits our race, you all know who are familiar with my devotion to the Ideal Emperor and to the Ideal Pope and to the Ideal Monarchy.

"That I saw, too, something of the mightiness by which human beings are united with one another through that relation between the male and the female we name love, is known to all who have done me the honor of studying my little work 'The New Life'.

"From my teachings concerning these two matters, and from my having broken the chains of tradition by composing my works in the vulgar speech in order that I might utter the more fully the thoughts and feelings which I shared with those around me, I think you will allow that I knew much and felt much more than I knew of the earthiness of human kinship.

"The great promise there is in recognizing that the unity of our race rests on the basis established in the modern ways indicated by our Grecian counselor, I clearly see. But when my vision wanders beyond this promise, I am harrowed by misgivings. What of that Blessed State Beyond which after all seems to be the only thing the eye of Faith beholds which can be a due recompense for all the woes we endure while on this earthly pilgrimage—the only thing which can be the fulfillment of all our longings?

"Would such a re-examination of man's political and moral and spiritual relationships as Aristotle proposes tend to confirm or to dispel the vision revealed to me through Faith, or would it tend to another and different Vision?

"May Heaven enable me thus to question, but without rebellion of soul, even though truth as it is indeed may be greatly otherwise than I have been wont to conceive it!"

Having ceased, Dante turns, and taking several steps toward the end of the wharf, looks off across the ocean.



After a few seconds of silence, except for the irregular muffled sound of the surf and the lapping of the waves against the piling below, Confucius moves to the spot where Dante has stood and speaks:

"The things that have been said here this afternoon, especially by him whose words last entered our ears, arouse in me a strange mixture of joy and sadness, of hope and query.

"What Dante has said about composing his works in the common tongue of his day, that he might be understood by all roundabout him appeals to me greatly, for despite the almost countless millions of our kind to whom my mother tongue has enabled me to speak my isolation from yet other countless millions has rested heavily upon me.

"To one who, as with myself, search for unity, all pervading, is a passion, severance such as has been my lot from myriads of my kind through custom and language is a great sorrow. But thanks to the mighty labors of our kindred beyond the bounds of my own land, an age of glory--because an age of universal converse and acquaintanceship--seems to be dawning.

"And thus does it come to pass that I am permitted to speak face to face with our fellow-counselor to whom we have just listened, touching the grave questions he has propounded.

"That men should be solicitous about the future is natural, for to be so is but to exercise that virtue, prudence, greatly extolled by me, which knows the connectedness of yesterday, today and tomorrow, and realizes that man's tomorrow is always partly in his own hands today. But in accordance with the doctrine of the Mean, which, as I believe you now know, is cardinal with me, to be over-solicitous for the future, as to be so for anything else of human weal, is to defeat the ends of prudence.

"Indeed, it is because I seem to see the truth, deep-hidden in my teaching about the Mean, working itself out more surely and really through the innumerable discoveries of the later world than I could imagine, that I eagerly endorse Aristotle's proposal.

"It appears to me that when the peoples of all lands shall come to regard the universe which creates and sustains them after the manner indicated by him, understanding will indeed lead to virtue, as I always contended it should; that then to know the truth will be to love it and that then, too, devotion to what is here and now will be a guarantee against over-solicitude for what the future, into which the light and power of understanding can not yet penetrate, may hold for us. Especially, as I now perceive, must that form of love which has its roots in the relation between the male and the female, and to which Dante has directed our thoughts as had no one before him, play a far larger, nobler part in the yet unacted part of the drama of our race than my earlier vision comprehended.



"One other matter in concluding my remarks: I am painfully aware that one reason why my teachings have fallen so far short of realization among those who have been instructed in them is that they have been received too formally, too <sup>serviently</sup> ~~versively~~, too unthinkingly, too unlovingly. Nor do I doubt that other teachers have seen their efforts half-foiled in a similar way. In view of the apparently universal tendency among men thus to shackle the teachings of their leaders, I would strongly urge that should the task proposed for this Institution by Aristotle be entered upon, more serious effort than usual be made to secure development in the spirit, as well as to instruct in the matter of the doctrines, which should be the fruits of the proposed labors. To carry out this suggestion seems the more practicable in that the major truths constituting the revised doctrines have their rootlets and tendrils everywhere, even about the youngest children and the simplest, least tutored adults. Could all be permitted and assisted to grow naturally in knowledge and in spirit I can not doubt that their personal lives and so the social structures erected through them would be nobler than those of any of their predecessors."

Concluding thus, Confucius steps to one side, and after a brief moment, Wordsworth speaks, without moving from his place, half-reclining on the wharf.

"Although the full import of what is being said here touching the unifiedness of man and his world reaches beyond the power of my intellect to grasp fully, as far as I am able to go in this way my sympathy is strongly aroused. But it is not on reason's side of the matter that I am moved to speak.

"Indeed I should have remained silent but for the incidental remark with which our fellow of the Far East concluded, to-wit, about so instructing the young concerning the world around them, and in the doctrines of their supreme teachers, that the letter of it all shall ever be imbued with the spirit of it.

"In this behalf I am constrained to speak because upon me it seemed to devolve, that my life's work should be that of helping my fellows to see the surpassing beauty and glory of the visible creation. 'Tis of the essence of man's soul, I am persuaded, to respond always to this beauty and glory. It is only when some untoward influence has crept in that this response languishes.

"I am likewise persuaded that since man's soul is of diverse parts, one of which is intellect and another responsiveness to beauty and sublimity in nature, intellect accomplishes its best toward understanding nature only when it is sensitized and actuated by such response.



"My plea is, then, that if well-calculated, sustained effort is to be put forth to insure that man's highest welfare in this world may be promoted through understanding of the world, then must the beauty of the world be called to the aid of understanding."

After a somewhat longer silence than has followed any of the preceding remarks, Jesus the Nazarene comes to a place central in the company and begins:

"With him to whom we last listened I, too, confess myself unable to understand fully all that seems implicated in the proposal made by our colleague Aristotle. So, too, must my counsel relate chiefly to the task of those who teach truth after it has been discovered rather than to the task of those who discover truth. For even more, perhaps, than Confucius, am I filled with sorrow at the misunderstandings and perversions which have fallen upon my teachings, even at the hands of those whose belief in me was the most ardent.

"And the weight of their error rests the more heavily upon me in that I fear the revelation of some of the truths which most animated my teaching was not altogether clear even to me, so that the form in which I set forth what I saw left a door open toward error. From which it results that I can not hold myself wholly blameless for the entrance into this door of many whose espousal of my doctrines have been very earnest and honest, but unwise.

"True, it seems to me that had all who have professed to follow me given full heed to my declaration that only the spirit of truth is able to lead men into the whole truth, few would have entered into the way of error which I did not close.

"But it is a great consolation to me that my fidelity to the spirit of truth is, or may be, known to all men, for this makes it not only incumbent upon me, but easy for me both to possess myself of whatever new truth may be revealed, but to urge its acceptance upon my followers.

"The truth to which I refer as having been previously revealed to me with somewhat of obscurity was expressed most simply in my figure of the branch and the vine. Had I been able to go on and on from this without break, even to the extent that, as I now see, Aristotle was able to follow the same truth from his figure of the members of a man's body and the body itself, the door to error of which I have spoken might not have been left open. But that vividness and intensity of personal feeling of kinship for all men, and of dependence upon the great all-enveloping Universe, which has given my teachings whatever of uniqueness and sustaining power for mankind they have had, led me into expressions, as that about my being in the father and the father in me, which, I now see, could be easily taken in a sense in which



I did not understand them. And I see also—and herein is the chief cause of my distress—that this misinterpretation of my words has worked a diversion of men's thoughts and affections from the real, ever-present source of their being and well-being, into fanciful realms and sources—realms and sources, to-wit, which do not lie within the bounds of the universal truth which I felt to be man's supreme need. And worse than all else, this same misinterpretation has led my disciples to believe that their sense of brotherliness and of moral duty are fully operative only within the group, called the Church, into which they have been inducted. It has made them ~~to~~ conceive that practical human brotherhood is a matter of choice, of election, and not of natural birth, as I now more clearly see it to be than I saw when originally setting forth my doctrine.

"I perceive that the error in this respect has had a narrowing and dwarfing effect on men's moral sense, in some such way as has the error which Aristotle says he fell into in conceiving the State to be man's highest associative good and obligation."

A longer silence ensues than had followed any previous discourse. This is broken by Le Conte, who without rising, says:

"One of the company has not yet given us the benefit of his counsel, though I am sure we all feel that his words would have great weight with us. Mr. Darwin, I mean."

After a few more moments of silence, Mr. Darwin rises slowly from his seat on the bow of a rowboat and begins, somewhat falteringly:

"My hesitation to join my voice in the quite remarkable conference being held here does not, I assure you, friends, come from want of interest in the matters under consideration, nor from lack of sympathy with the general aims, as I understand them, of the proposal made by Aristotle.

"But I confess myself greatly perplexed by some of the things which have been touched upon and hence am in doubt as to whether or not I ought to second the proposal, involving as it does a specific undertaking for this scientific Institution.

"That about which my doubts center is the general mode of interpreting living nature discovered by Aristotle and followed in part by Mr. Ritter. I knew something about this when I was doing my work but could not see then, nor, I freely confess, do I now see how that method can be reconciled with the demonstrations produced by me concerning the origin of the myriad kinds of organic beings that inhabit the earth.



"To be sure my discoveries strengthened, very greatly I think, belief in the unity of all life. But how the uniting principles brought to light by me can enhance those feelings of kindred and of sympathy among men which are assumed in the moral and religious doctrines of human brotherhood and the golden rule, and which unquestionably do exist, I find very difficult to understand, much as I would like to be convinced that my work could be turned thus to account.

"But while I am somewhat confused about this, the vital element in Aristotle's proposal, with the remarks voiced by several of the counselors relative to guarding against the misunderstanding and perversion of teachings, I am in the heartiest accord, for I am distressed beyond measure by what has befallen some of the ideas set forth by me. It seems incredible to me that what I taught about the superiority of those living beings which are best adapted to the conditions under which their lives are past could have been appealed to in justification of unrighteous and cruel acts in the domain of human industry and commerce; yet that such has actually been done, even on a vast scale, I can not avoid seeing.

"If ways of teaching could be devised which would assure more of the spirit of what is taught than has usually been secured, the good conferred upon mankind would, I think, be incalculable."

Having finished, Mr. Darwin resumes his seat on the boat, and Mr. Leconte steps promptly to his former place beside the old iron winch and says:

"Gentlemen, it is unnecessary for me to try to tell you the good your being here and counseling with us will be to us. Every word you have spoken will weigh in the deliberations by our managing board before a course of action in the matter dealt with is determined upon.

"But now before we separate I trust every one of you will join us in partaking of the simple refreshments which will be served by the good ladies of our little community. And permit me to ask that the food we offer you shall incite you to a train of reflection quite remote from that which has been central in our deliberations.

"One of the items of our repast will be smoked albacore. The savory, wholesome meat which we thus give you is made from a noble fish which abounds in the waters off these shores. And since the natural history of this animal falls within the scope of a primary department of the researches which this Institution is engaged upon, it is a supreme satisfaction to us that through this our labors find one way to enhance the material wealth and well-being of men. So that after all the utter remoteness, as at first it appears, between this side of our enterprise and the human biology which Aristotle would launch us into, disappears, for the two sides are seen to flow imperceptibly into each other.



"The glory of the earth and the heavens can be fully revealed only by the toils of many generations of sailors and mechanics and scientists and mathematicians , all existent because of food like unto that which the waters of the sea provide.

"Through the performance with our right hand of some such task as that proposed by Aristotle would we sanctify the industry of our left hand in ferreting out the myriad secrets, great and small, of the Pacific Ocean and its incalculable riches of living things.

"Friends, eat with us heartily to the end that we may live splendidly and forever."