Samuel Alexander Biography

Samuel Alexander

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Biography

The British philosopher Samuel Alexander (1859-1938) was a forceful exponent of metaphysics at a time when that subject had largely fallen into disrepute. His work shows a fine capacity for synthesis and system.

Samuel Alexander was born in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, on Jan. 6, 1859. His early education was at Wesley College in Melbourne. He went to England in 1877 with a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where he took the *literae humaniores* (humanities) degree, reading mathematics and philosophy. After graduation he stayed on at Oxford as a fellow of Lincoln College, where he taught philosophy. He was the first Jew to be a fellow at Oxford.

While at Oxford, Alexander was awarded the Green Moral Philosophy Prize for a dissertation in ethics, which formed the basis for his first publication, *Moral Order and Progress* (1889). This book secured Alexander a wide reputation and, in 1893, a chair of philosophy at the University of Manchester, which he held until his retirement in 1924. After retirement he continued to live in Manchester, where he was well known and well loved, a nearly legendary figure. The city and the university honored him in 1925 by erecting an impressive bust by the sculptor Jacob Epstein.

Alexander's major work came late in life with his Gifford Lectures, later published as a book, *Space, Time and Deity* (1920). The book is a complex metaphysics in the grand manner, portraying the world as an evolving hierarchy of emerging qualities: space-time, matter, life, mind, and finally deity. Each new quality depends on the lower ones but at the same time presents something genuinely novel.

In 1933 Alexander collected some of his papers on ethics and esthetics and issued them under the title *Beauty and the Other Forms of Value*. More of his papers were issued in book form after his death. Many of these pieces show a geniality and sense of fun quite different from his systematic works. Reading them, one comes to understand why a friend characterized him as "deep but gay."

In appearance Alexander was forceful and impressive. He looked every inch the philosopher, with a flowing beard, high forehead, and penetrating glance. A bachelor, he had a genius for friendship with persons of all ages and situations.