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SIR OLIVER LODGE

(Principal of the Birmingham University)

ON

“OUR PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE.”

AN ADDRESS

TO THE

MEMBERS OF THE NELSON STREET
ADULT SCHOOL,

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IT is a great privilege and responsibility to come to this old Church of George Dawson's and stand before an audience like this. It is only recently I have heard of this great movement, which has been going on so long in Birmingham—originated by Sturge and carried on by Cadbury and Lloyd, (our Lord Mayor at the present time) and others. I do not feel that to an audience like this it would be appropriate for me to attempt to teach anything, on ordinary subjects, to men who are in close contact with the facts of life, who all work so energetically, who have each some handicraft skill far greater than my own; but it often occurs to me that in the midst of all the strenuous work that goes on in a city like this there is hardly sufficient leisure for thought and realisation—too little time to ask why we are here, why we so work and what is the meaning of existence. We are like a wheel in a mechanism, it is true, but we have something the wheel has not—we have consciousness. We can bethink ourselves of what we are working for and what is the meaning of it all. I stand here as a student of Science, and it is the business of a student of Science to think out these problems as well as he can. He may be mistaken; his conclusions may be erroneous; but he should do his best to come to some understanding of what I may call "our place in the Universe." And it is on this subject that I propose to say a few words to-day.

We find ourselves on the surface of a lump of matter, which we call the Earth, and which is for a time our home. This lump of matter is only one of an enormous number scattered throughout space. For a long time the human race was ignorant of the contents of space, and it might quite well have been that it was always ignorant ; for if the atmosphere had happened to be always cloudy, or if the ether had not been quite so remarkably transparent as it is, we should have known nothing of the other worlds in space. We might not even have known the sun, except as some luminosity in the sky whereby the clouds became brighter every twelve hours ; we should have known and guessed nothing of the stars. I should like to use this as a parable to suggest that there may be many other existences in the Universe which we might become aware of if we had proper organs of sense, or if there was nothing to prevent our vision of them. What we see and feel and know about, is in all probability only a minute fragment of what there is to know and see.

On this planet we see an immense variety of life. When you come to consider the different creatures and planets—some of the animals most curious—some of them in their queer shapes, a lobster for instance, almost incredible ; one feels occasionally like the little girl who went with her mother to the Zoological Gardens, and after seeing all the curious animals there said : “ Mother, I suppose there are not really such animals as these ” [laughter]. Wherever life is possible there we find it ; may it not be possible that it exists where we have no direct evidence of it.

On this planet we are the highest of the forms of life that we see. Now some creature must be the highest, as