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A HAND-BOOK TO THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

A Hand-Book to the History of Philosophy. For the Use of Students. By Ernest Belfort Bax. Bohn's Philosophical Library. Pp. 405. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1886.)

THE task to which Mr. Bax has set himself in writing a short and at the same time intelligible account of the history of philosophy is anything but an easy one. The historian of philosophy finds himself in presence of an enormous amount of material, which has accumulated as system has followed system in what at first sight seems a bewildering succession. It will naturally occur to the reader to ask whether after all the history of superseded systems of philosophy is of much more than antiquarian interest, or whether at best its study can be expected to repay the necessary trouble.

There is a pretty widespread idea that philosophy, or "metaphysics," has led to nothing but disappointing failures in the past, and cannot from its very nature lead to any result of real value. This idea would appear to depend on a radical misconception as to the nature and scope of philosophical inquiry. Those in search of first principles in any department of science cannot fail to come across questions which they find cannot be solved by the methods which may be applied to the ordinary questions occurring within their science. Such questions occur naturally and necessarily in mathematics, physics, biology, art, &c., and in virtue of their similarity may be all classified as philosophical questions. As a familiar example we may take the question, which must necessarily come prominently before the physiologist, as to whether consciousness is a function of the body. It is pretty generally acknowledged that this question cannot be solved by experimental methods. The question is a philosophical one, and can only be attacked by the method of philosophy.

Let us see what this method is, and how it is to be applied to the case in question. Mr. Bax defines philosophy as the result of the endeavour to reconstruct the world according to its possibility. Applying the method here indicated we have to ask whether it is possible to conceive the world of our experience on the supposition that consciousness is a function of the body. This was substantially the question which Locke set himself to answer; and it was finally answered by Hume, who showed that the supposition in question led necessarily to its own annihilation. It remained for Kant and his successors to point the way to the only hypothesis consistent with the facts.

Such being the scope and method of philosophy, we may readily understand that its history is no mere record of an arbitrary series of speculations successively displacing one another, but never leading to any permanent result. Modern philosophy has centred round the discussion of the relation of matter and thought; and its successive systems form so many landmarks in the progress towards a solution of the fundamental questions

involved in this discussion. Each system is doubtless more or less burdened with superfluities and errors of detail; and many philosophical works have been written by men famous in their day, but who failed to realise the true position of philosophical thought in their time, and thus cannot be assigned a permanent place in the history of philosophy.

Progress in philosophy is nevertheless just as well marked as in any department of science; and it is the special merit of Mr. Bax's hand-book that this progress is everywhere clearly brought into prominence.

There is one important respect in which the history of philosophy differs from that of any of the sciences, and which gives it a far greater relative importance. The detailed results of a science have a value of their own more or less independently of theoretical considerations or of other facts of the science in question. Thus the experimental results of chemistry have each a value independently of the truth of the vast majority of the other experimental results of the science, and even of the atomic theory itself. In philosophy, on the other hand, the conclusions arrived at are closely interdependent, and have no value apart from the general conception to which they belong, and the process by which that conception has been arrived at. It is as if the conclusions of chemistry were entirely valueless apart from the atomic theory and its correct application in detail. If this were so, it is evident that the history of the atomic theory and its application would be the first essential for the student of chemistry, instead of being what, as a matter of fact, many students of chemistry have only a very hazy notion of. Philosophical conclusions may be said to include the process by which they have been arrived at, so that a knowledge of the history of philosophy is in reality the basis of all study of philosophy. For this reason it will probably only lead to perplexity and disappointment to attempt the study of any philosopher without knowing the point at which he took up the work of his predecessors. Just as the individual organism shadows forth in its own development the forms assumed in the evolution of the stock to which it belongs, so the student of philosophy must repeat in his own mind the essential points in the historical development of philosophy.

A detailed criticism of Mr. Bax's work would scarcely be in place here. The book is on the whole an excellent piece of work. It is less of a summary, and much more readable, than the similar work of Schwegler, and for this reason will probably be preferred by English students. Due weight is as a rule given to the elements in any philosophical system which were of permanent value in influencing subsequent thought, while systems which were in reality anachronisms, however much stir they may have made, are passed over rapidly.

There are few positive blots in the book. One of these, cropping up in one form or other at various places, consists in the writer's persistent identification of the "anti-worldliness" of Christianity with "other-worldliness." As regards this and other kindred subjects the candour of Mr. Bax's expressions of opinion will, however, thoroughly commend themselves to the reader.

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