

Egotism in German Philosophy

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EGOTISM
IN
GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

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PREFACE

THIS book is one of the many that the present war has brought forth, but it is the fruit of a long gestation. During more than twenty years, while I taught philosophy at Harvard College, I had continual occasion to read and discuss German metaphysics. From the beginning it wore in my eyes a rather questionable shape. Under its obscure and fluctuating tenets I felt something sinister at work, something at once hollow and aggressive. It seemed a forced method of speculation, producing more confusion than it found, and calculated chiefly to enable practical materialists to call themselves idealists and rationalists to remain theologians. At the same time the fear that its secret might be eluding me, seeing that by blood and tradition I was perhaps handicapped in the matter, spurred me to great and prolonged efforts to understand what confronted me so bewilderingly. I wished to be as clear and just about it as I could—more clear and just, indeed, than it ever was about itself.

For the rest, German philosophy was never my chief interest, and I write frankly as an outsider, with no professorial pretensions; merely using my common reason in the presence of claims put forth by others to a logical authority and a spiritual supremacy which they are far from possessing.

A reader indoctrinated in the German schools is, therefore, free not to read further. My object is neither to repeat his familiar arguments in their usual form, nor to refute them; my object is to describe them intelligibly and to judge them from the point of view of the layman, and in his interests. For those who wish to study German philosophy, the original authors are at hand: all I would give here is the aroma of German philosophy that has reached my nostrils. If the reader has smelt something of the kind, so much the better: we shall then understand each other. The function of history or of criticism is not passively to reproduce its subject-matter. One real world, with one stout corpus of German philosophy, is enough. Reflection and description are things superadded, things which ought to be more winged and more selective than what they play upon. They are echoes of reality in the sphere of art, sketches which may achieve all the truth appropriate to them without belying their creative limitations: for their essence is to be intellectual symbols, at once indicative and original.

Egotism—subjectivity in thought and wilfulness in morals—which is the soul of German philosophy, is by no means a gratuitous thing. It is a genuine expression of the pathetic situation in which any animal finds itself upon earth, and any intelligence in the universe. It is an inevitable and initial circumstance in life. But like every material accident, it is a thing to abstract from and to discount as far as possible. The perversity of the Germans, the childishness and sophistry of their position, lies only in glorifying what

is an inevitable impediment, and in marking time on an earthly station from which the spirit of man—at least in spirit—is called to fly.

This glorified and dogged egotism, which a thousand personal and technical evidences had long revealed to me in German philosophy, might now, I should think, be evident to the whole world. Not that the German philosophers are responsible for the war, or for that recrudescence of corporate fanaticism which prepared it from afar. They merely shared and justified prophetically that spirit of uncompromising self-assertion and metaphysical conceit which the German nation is now reducing to action. It is a terrible thing to have a false religion, all the more terrible the deeper its sources are in the human soul. Like many a false religion before it, this which now inspires the Germans has made a double assault upon mankind, one with the secular arm, and another by solemn asseverations and sophistries. This assault, though its incidental methods may be dubious, has been bold and honest enough in principle. It has been like those which all conquerors and all founders of militant religions have made at intervals against liberty or reason. And the issue will doubtless be the same. Liberty may be maimed, but not killed; reason may be bent, but not broken. The dark aggression is to be repelled, if possible, by force of arms; but failing that, it will be nullified in time by the indomitable moral resistance which maturer races, richer in wisdom, can exert successfully against the rude will of the conqueror.

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