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GREAT PHILOSOPHIES OF THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

IN the following pages I have endeavoured to give a brief outline of some famous systems of philosophy. As it is clearly impossible within the limits of a book of this size even to indicate all the views which philosophers have entertained, I have selected those which, besides possessing a title to inclusion on their own account, lend themselves more or less readily to the purposes of popular exposition.

Philosophy is a difficult subject, and, to those who are not familiar with the twists and turns of the speculative reason, somewhat bewildering. It rejoices, moreover, in technical terms. These latter I have endeavoured scrupulously to avoid, and, for the rest, I hope that there is nothing in these pages which will prove unintelligible to those who are tackling the subject for the first time.

A word may be added with regard to the general character of the philosophies outlined. As the reader proceeds, it will be borne in upon him not only that the conclusions reached by different philosophies are hopelessly at variance, but that there seems to be no sort of agreement even as to the subjects which should be discussed. If philosophers do not know what they are looking for, how, he may be tempted to ask, are they to be expected to find it, at which point he will call to mind some time-honoured gibe about a philosopher being like a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there.

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For all this, let him not be tempted lightly to dismiss philosophy. The philosopher seeks to comprehend the universe as a whole; not, like physics or biology, a special department of it, but the whole mass of data to which the moral intuitions of the ordinary man, the religious consciousness of the saint, the æsthetic enjoyment of the artist, and the history of the human race, no less than the discoveries of the physicist and the biologist, contribute. To look for certain fixed and definite knowledge in regard to a subject-matter of so all-embracing a character is unreasonable.

In the first place, the subject-matter is itself in a state of continual flux. It is not philosophy alone that is changing and self-contradictory; the record of science is strewn with the débris of discarded theories, and the scientific laws and formulæ of one age are superseded in the next. At the moment the physicists are presenting us with new theories about the constitution of the material universe at about the rate of one every ten years, while biology is in a state of perpetual controversy about the cause and character of the evolution of life. But more important than differences in the data about which the philosopher speculates are the differences in the minds of philosophers. Philosophy is not content to catalogue the facts; it inquires into their meaning. Pooling the experiences of the scientist, the saint, the artist, and the common man it asks what must be the nature of the universe in which such experiences are possible. It is interested, in other words, not so much in the facts as in their significance. Thus it establishes principles of selection and rejection whereby some of the facts are shown to be important, while others are rejected as trivial or condemned as illusory; it assigns values, too, and assesses the universe in respect of its beauty or its goodness.

Now, this search for meaning and significance, this task of assessment and valuation, involves considerations of a highly personal character. We shall select

according to what we think important; we shall group and arrange according to likenesses which we think significant; we shall assign values to what we recognise as beautiful or good. What we think important or significant or beautiful will depend very largely upon the sort of minds we possess, and not only upon our minds, but also upon our characters and temperaments. One man will detect common elements where another observes only a chaos of differences; some will recognise the hand of God in what others insist to be a haphazard collection of fortuitous events. Thus, while the facts are the same for all, the conclusions which we base upon them will be different. Nor need this difference be deplored: just as it takes all sorts of men to make a world, so does it take all sorts of minds to make the truth about the world, and philosophy is no more to be dismissed because each philosopher has a different system, than morality is to be invalidated by the fact of differing moral judgments, or religion proclaimed to be nonsense because there are innumerable variations of religious belief.

But for all that, philosophy, which is not to be lightly attempted by any, should be eschewed altogether by some. There are those who feel an imperative need to believe, for whom the value of a belief is proportionate not to its truth, but to its definiteness. Incapable either of admitting the existence of contrary judgments or of suspending their own, they supply the place of knowledge by turning other men's conjectures into dogmas. To such the uncertainties of philosophy will bring nothing but irritation and contempt, and they should not, therefore, read this book.

There are, however, others, and, if it should prove to be the means of introducing these to the original works of the great philosophers, it will not have been written in vain.

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