

ARTICLE XI.

CRITICAL NOTE.

LEIBNITZ'S PLACE IN PHILOSOPHY.

FOR depth and originality of thought united with clearness of expression, no thinker, except Plato and Shakespeare, can rank with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. He was more learned than either, even making allowance for the eras in which these lived. Indeed, for breadth and exactitude of his derived knowledge, Aristotle is his only superior; while Gladstone, Whewell, and Pascal may alone be considered his peers. In the influence which he has had on thought no philosopher since the Revival of Learning has been so suggestive in so many directions. There was no matter relating to physics, philosophy, or religion, which did not at some time occupy his absorbed attention, and be enriched by his grasp of thought which to ordinary minds seemed intuitive and akin to omniscience. He passed rapidly from subject to subject, but for a brief period gave his powers with concentrated force to the matter in hand. He had the faculty, rare among *polymaths*, of absorbed attention, amid the most varied and distracting cares, while engaged on any subject, and then of turning at once to another wholly different with like concentrated intensity. Hence he could not be justly called desultory, though he did not give enough time to any one line of investigation to do his powers full justice. It was a misfortune for the world of philosophy that he did not dwell longer on a select few of those metaphysical problems which always confront us, and embody his speculations in a system. For had he given his life to such a work, we can easily believe that it would have surpassed any other that has ever been elaborated. But he spent his long literary activity in sowing seed-thoughts which have found their way—generally without acknowledgment—into the works of every great writer who has lived since his day. Possibly he did not wish to construct a system or found a school; preferring, like Schleiermacher, who resembled him in so many characteristics, to throw out suggestions which should be seed-corn adapted to take root and bear fruit in every age and soil.

There is nothing stranger in the history of great authors than the fate of Leibnitz's writings. Much of his work has been before the world more than two centuries, and all of it nearly that long, and yet no adequate edition of the whole has been published. The cause for this is not apparent, but probably arises from the fact that no one is able to edit

properly the work of an extraordinary genius. For the ability to do this would make the editor on a par with the author himself; and if so he would prefer to do original and independent work. True it is in Leibnitz's case there has been no complete edition of his writings, despite the fact that they are acknowledged to be of transcendent importance, and are referred to constantly by all who touch upon any of the multifarious subjects which he treated. The editions of Raspe and Dutens are confessedly incomplete, and have little value for settling the text. Nor are they furnished with adequate critical helps for understanding the allusions of the author to other writers. The edition of Erdmann was by a competent editor; but he contented himself with the bare text, without illustration. The new work of Gerhardt is a great advance over all that had been previously done. We here have a correct text, valuable prolegomena, and many critical notes on the portions embraced in this edition. But this, though extended to seven volumes, embraces only the philosophical works, and is not intended to be complete—containing not half of Leibnitz's writings. An edition of the complete works is likely to remain a desideratum for a long time to come.

The great awakening in philosophical studies connected with the centennial of Kant is shown in a profuse crop of literature which bears marks of originality, but still more in critical editions of authors who have exerted wide influence on human thought. Much has been done in England of great value in editorial work. The translation of Kant's "Kritik" by Müller; the editions of Hume, Locke, and Berkeley, may be mentioned. In our own country, while the undertaking has not been so pretentious, yet it has been as well done in its reach, which has been confined to separate treatises. The first notable work in this line was by Krauth on Berkeley's "Principles of Knowledge." In the same connection we should speak of the admirable translation of Ueberweg's "History of Philosophy" by the lamented Morris; Schwegler's "History by Seelye"—both achievements of the highest order of ability. These have been followed in these last five years by so much that is good that we can only specify Windelband's History of Philosophy, by Tufts, Weber's, by Thilly; the translations of several philosophical treatises by Harris, and Duncan; followed lastly by the book which we are now considering. The recent edition of the New Essays by Langley¹ meets a want that has been keenly felt by all English philosophers who are interested in the great work of Locke. For this gave an impetus to speculative thought which has scarcely been equaled by any single treatise in the language. In fact, Locke's Essay was a quickening power not confined to England, but was quickly felt throughout the world of speculative thought. Its influence for good, as an awakening note, was felt by many who did not accept the author's views. Its tendency was too materialistic for the genius of the English people; and the inferences drawn from its doctrines,

¹ See *supra*, p. 593.

though not in agreement with the author's purpose, furnished the arguments which were employed by materialists; and bore their true fruit in Hume's agnosticism and the French infidelity of D'Holbach and La Mettrie. While this tendency was perceived and partly corrected by Berkeley, it was reserved for Leibnitz to grapple with its materialism directly, and avowedly with the purpose for its overthrow. As Locke's cardinal doctrine was that there are no Innate Ideas, but all come through sensation, which gives the data on which Reflection works, it was an easy, and indeed an inevitable step, that the senses furnish all our knowledge by mechanical causation. For they are material instruments and work on material objects in order to produce knowledge, and therefore the mind is only an assumed instrument for their expression. It develops as they increase in power; it decays with their decay; and therefore has no independent personality or existence. Leibnitz saw this to be the legitimate result of Locke's theory even before Hume or other materialists developed its consequences, and determined to meet and check this formidable error. In his "Nouveaux Essais" he controverts successfully every point in Locke's system, which, either by fair interpretation or by wresting its meaning, as was done by Hume and the French agnostics, could lead to materialism. He shows his marvelous power in this masterpiece of his speculation on almost every page, and especially his genius to seize, as by intuition, that which is the essential idea in a disputed matter. It is doubtful if ever there was more argument contained in a whole chapter of any book of controversial writing than Leibnitz wielded by the use of three words. In the celebrated utterance, *Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu*, which summed up the arguments of materialism, he saw instinctively the error, and as deftly brushed it away as my Uncle Toby did the bluebottle-fly which disturbed his afternoon siesta. By the addition of the words *nisi intellectus ipse*, which appeals to the common-sense of mankind, the brocard is torn from the gown of materialism, and with it all the specious ignorance which covered its naked deformity. By this significant addition he showed that there could not be anything in the intellect if it did not itself exist; and having no prior existence it could not be the instrument to receive and elaborate the testimony of the senses. The whole mass of sophistry which materialists had gathered to prove that they had no minds is rendered harmless in this retort of genius; and the intellect, the spiritual nature, is shown to be the independent factor to which the senses must report, and to which they must yield obedience. Without this the information furnished by the senses could neither be interpreted nor find expression. As we see this addition of three words cut the Gordian knot of Sensational Philosophy, we wonder how any one could have failed to perceive that which is so obvious as soon as genius strikes the electric spark.

While the overthrow of the materialistic tendencies of Locke's Essay is the service for which Leibnitz gets the most credit, there are many

other doctrines of the New Essays which are of firstrate importance in Philosophy. He contends as strenuously as Aristotle did,¹ that there are first truths which cannot be the result of experience, but are native to mathematical axioms which have their counterparts in the first truths or assumptions which are employed in every domain of knowledge, are the product of the mind acting through its own native powers. It must of the mind; that these truths, such as the principle of contradiction and the necessity be true that all universal principles arise in this way, since no amount of experience could lead to what is more than probable; and so, if there are no innate ideas as regulative principles for the intellect to guide its own action, there could be no science whatever.

Hence it is clear why Leibnitz thought that all subjects of human inquiry, resting as they do on the ultimate data of *a priori* truths, could be demonstrated; and therefore mathematics really has in this respect no exclusive prerogative. This view has been held by some of the greatest thinkers in all ages; and, while often derided as visionary, has the power of an endless life; and it appears to us that by his clear treatment of this doctrine Leibnitz rendered his most valuable service to philosophy. No man ever lived who had a better right to be heard when he enunciated his views on any subject which required depth and clearness of intellect wielding universal knowledge. The application of the mathematical method to moral reasoning could not be an idle dream when advocated by the inventor of fluxions; whose acquaintance with the truths of religion and philosophy embraced all the knowledge of the world up to his era—including more additions made by himself than by any other uninspired thinker since Plato.

His power of grasping the essential idea of a subject, and of expressing it in such a way as to compel assent because there is no room left for any other conception, was a characteristic of his genius. For instance, when he says, "If geometry were as much opposed to our passion and present interests as ethics, we should contest it, and violate it but little less," etc. (p. 93). For each branch of human knowledge must rest on data furnished by the mind as an integral part of its constitution. Hence all that is necessary to demonstrate in any department of inquiry is to gain clear conceptions, construct accurate definitions, and exact nomenclature, and then apply the syllogistic process. If we do this we can have the same assurance in other sciences as in mathematics. The reason is obvious. For the process of reasoning must in the last analysis rest on first principles, which cannot be demonstrated any more than the axioms of geometry. They must be assumed without proof because they are furnished by the mind itself, and approve themselves because they are conformable to its structure.

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¹Metaph., iii. 4 *initio*.