

Professor Thomas Hill Green.

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I.

IT is only by diligent study of his works, and by a comparison of them with the writings of other thinkers of our time, that we become aware of the unique greatness of Professor Green. At a time when the various physical and biological sciences have made so great an advance that they attached to them and to the study of them some of the brightest and keenest intellects of the age; when the methods and results of these sciences tended to make men forget the existence of facts which cannot be explained by physical or biological law, Professor Green was able to vindicate with unique power and success the necessity of metaphysic, and its claim to be the only synthetic method by which human knowledge can be unified. He knew the history of philosophy as few people did. He knew the various forms which the problem of knowledge had assumed from the time of Greek philosophy downward. He saw and could state with clearness the inevitable advance from one form of the problem to another until we arrive at the present state of the question. His Introductions to Hume have a dramatic sort of completeness about them. He starts with an account of Locke's problem and his method; shows how, from his conception of the problem, he was led to an inadequate and one-sided solution. He shows next how Locke's system was inevitably followed by Berkeley, and Berkeley gave rise to the system of Hume. The filiation of one system of philosophy to another was never shown so well, nor was the inevitable tendency of human thought to work out its logical results across the ages ever demonstrated so dramatically. In Green's hands every step in the process is brought to light, and every step is seen to be inevitable, and after Hume there is nothing further to be accomplished on that line. Hume has exhausted the possibilities of the problem of philosophy as it had been set by Locke. But British philosophy has not yet seen that Hume has spoken the last word on the old lines. We find, indeed, that many are still writing and still working on the old lines just as if Hume had not written, and had not shown that from the premises

assumed by Hume, Hume's conclusion must inevitably follow.

The first great service to philosophy which Green did was to set forth in clear terms the connection between Locke and Hume. He made it clear to all who would take the trouble to read, and who were competent to understand, that the problem of philosophy had to be stated anew. We must ask the question in another way if we are to obtain an answer. While Green shows that Hume brought philosophy to a deadlock, and his efforts were therefore so far a failure, yet the failure of the system which culminated in Hume was one "which brought out a new truth, and compelled a step forward in the progress of thought." Hume took a system of thought, consisting of what were then and are still commonplaces with educated Englishmen, and thought them out to their logical issues, with the consequence that thought itself was destroyed. One is almost sorry as he follows Green paragraph by paragraph, from Locke to Berkeley, and from Berkeley to Hume, to find the fabric which he had perhaps been brought up to respect torn asunder, and to find there how baseless are these notions which are still current amongst men. For the scheme of Locke is still dominant, and many men write as if they could continue to affirm Hume's premises and deny his conclusion. For example, here is a paragraph from one of the latest, and certainly one of the ablest, of recent writers on what he calls science, but is really metaphysic. Any student of philosophy will at once see that he assumes the premises of Hume. "To begin with, I receive certain impressions of size and shape and colour by means of my organs of sight, and these enable me to pronounce with very considerable certainty that the object is a black board made of wood and coated with paint even before I have touched or measured it. I *infer* that I shall find it hard and heavy, that I could if I pleased saw it up, and that I should find it to possess various other properties which I have learnt to *associate* with wood and paint" (Professor Karl Pearson, *Grammar of*

Science, p. 48). Professor Pearson thus describes consciousness: "Thus what we term consciousness is largely, if not wholly, due to the stock of stored sense-impressions, and to the manner in which these condition the messages given to the motor nerves when a sensory nerve has conveyed a message to the brain. The measure of consciousness will thus largely depend on (1) the extent and variety of past sense-impressions, or what might be termed the complexity and plasticity of the brain" (*Grammar of Science*, p. 48). Professor Pearson is simply a typical instance, one of many who write from the same point of view and to the same effect. He attempts to build up a consciousness from stored up sense-impressions, and he has not seen that the course of philosophy from Locke to Hume is a demonstration that he has attempted an impossible task. The existence of such thinkers as Professor Pearson shows what a needful task was undertaken by Professor Green when he set himself to write the Introductions to Hume.

Green has shown that experience is possible only when a thinking subject is presupposed. In truth this is the presupposition of Professor Pearson also. For in the passage quoted above, he says: "I receive certain impressions," "I have touched," "I infer," and really refers all his experience to the conscious self. It is difficult to suppose that he has really read Green and the various statements which Green repeats almost to weariness on this important point, and it is equally difficult to suppose that Professor Pearson can really mean by consciousness what he has appeared to say. How mere sense-impressions could store themselves up, and how by storing themselves up they could form a consciousness, is a hopeless puzzle. But in truth every statement he makes involves such references to the conscious self that he cannot even get the statement made except by such a reference. We may quote one extract from Professor Green. "It is evident that the ground on which we make this statement, that mere sensation from the matter of experience warrants us in making it, if at all, only as a statement in regard to the mental history of the individual. Even in this reference it can scarcely be accepted. There is no positive basis for it but the fact that, so far as memory goes, we always find ourselves manipulating some data of consciousness, themselves independent of any intellectual manipulation which we can remember applying to them. But on the strength

of this to assume that there are such data in the history of our experience, consisting of mere sensations, antecedently to any action of our intellect, is not really an intelligible inference from the fact stated. It is an abstraction which may be put into words, but to which no real meaning can be attached. For a sensation can only form an object of experience in being determined by an intelligent subject which distinguishes it from itself and contemplates it in relation to other sensations; so that to suppose a primary datum or matter of the individual's experience, wholly void of intellectual determination, is to suppose such experience to begin with what could not belong to or be an object of experience at all" (*Prolegomena to Ethics*, p. 47).

It is part of Professor Green's service to his generation to show that for experience you need a self to begin with, and that you cannot build up a self by sense-impressions, or by any manipulation or multiplication of them. His historical study of Hume and his predecessors had landed him in the very midst of current psychological controversies. Some, indeed, had apprehended the significance of Hume, and saw that they must make a new departure if philosophy were to continue. The Scottish philosophy had sought to go back to first principles and to turn the flank of Hume's movement, and with a creditable result; how creditable may be seen from the able work of Professor Seth on the Scottish philosophy. But on this significant section of the history of philosophy we may not dwell. Nor can we dwell on the German answer to Hume, except in so far as it relates to Professor Green. But Hume and his significance had been completely ignored by English psychologists, and particularly by those who approached the study of mind from the side of physiology and of physical and biological science. To Professor Green it seemed that "current English psychology ignored the metaphysical question raised by Hume." He had expressed this conviction in the Introduction, and he found that he was bound to make it good. He set himself to study the psychological works of Mr. Herbert Spencer and of Mr. George H. Lewes. These writers occupied the foremost place among their fellows, and Mr. Spencer, in particular, was held up as the man who had elaborated a system of philosophy of the highest importance. Evolutionists called him "our philosopher." It

was not enough for Professor Green to have shown that current systems of philosophy which ignored Hume were an anachronism. He felt bound to do so by a direct examination of them and a criticism of their contents. Hence his examination of the works of Spencer and of Lewes republished in the first volume of his collected works. The works of Spencer have called forth many criticisms. But, from his own point of view, there has been no attack so deadly or so triumphant as that made by Professor Green. He does prove that Mr. Spencer's psychology involves an anachronism, that his premises are not to be distinguished from those of Hume, and that his conclusion ought to be scepticism. Mr. Spencer had tried to explain knowledge from the independent action of object on subject, and yet he presupposes their mutual relation. Mr. Spencer had been constrained to make mind secondary and derivative, for in no other way could he bring mind under the general formula of evolution which his system endeavours to establish. He is compelled, therefore, to give a new meaning to consciousness, to make his "object" to be both in and out of consciousness, and to translate an aggregate of states of consciousness into an "unknowable reality beyond consciousness." In this way he has been able to construct such a view of the genesis of mind as made it wholly dependent on matter and motion. If Professor Green had done nothing else than set forth the incompetency of such a method of philosophising, he would have done incomparable service. He has done this with such conspicuous power that there is a hope of our getting rid in due time of the Spencerian psychology and its popular imitations. It is only a hope, however, for, like the Bourbons, this kind of philosophy learns nothing and forgets nothing. It has survived the criticism of history; it may for a time survive the criticism of Green. It may continue to build as if the foundations of it were not destroyed, but the true student of the history of thought will always know how much of an anachronism it is.

From Green we have also got a vivid and real account of the German answer to Hume. An English student can now really know Kant, and what Kant has done, better, we had almost said,

than a German student not acquainted with English can. From the works of Caird, Stirling, Adamson, Watson, and Wallace, to mention only the chief English expositors of Kant, we can know what was the problem of philosophy set to Kant, what his solution of it was, how far he had succeeded, and how far he did not succeed. We can appreciate the great historical position of Kant and his significance for psychology. Green's contribution to this great theme is a significant one. He has thought out the matter for himself, and his aim always is "to see in philosophy a progress in effort towards a fully-articulated of the world as rational." He says "the past history of philosophy is of interest as representing steps in this progress which have been already taken for us, and which, if we will make them our own, carry us so far on our way towards the freedom of perfect understanding; while to ignore them is not to return to the simplicity of a pre-philosophic age, but to condemn ourselves to grope in the maze of "cultivated opinion" itself, the confused result of those past systems of thought which we will not trouble ourselves to think out" (*Works*, vol. i. pp. 4, 5). His study of historical philosophical systems are of unique value, just because he set himself to make his own, and to think out every system in its given historical position and relations. Whether he deals with Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, or Hegel, we always find him striving to look at the problem set to these great thinkers as it appeared to them. For them it was a real problem, and Green always tries to see the reality of it. There is, therefore, no more instructive writer on the history of philosophy. It is true that his mode of writing the history of philosophy has its inconveniences. For we have in it partly expositions of the theory he is dealing with, partly expositions of Green's own view, and partly criticisms of the one theory from the point of view of the other. The style, too, is sometimes far from lucid; it is too much weighed with thought to be perspicuous at a first reading, and the exposition is so entangled with criticism that one can hardly tell sometimes which is which. But the meaning is always there, and does disclose itself to patient study, and when we get it we always find it to be worth the toil.