

**LESSING'S
EDUCATION OF THE
HUMAN RACE; PP 1-55**

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Lessing's Education of the Human Race; pp 1-55 by John Dearling Haney

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Columbia Univ. Teacher's college
Contributions to Education.

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HUMAN RACE**

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PREFACE

Lessing's tractate, *The Education of the Human Race*, is an account of how the world received and is still receiving revelation that is to prepare man for the attainment of the best that is in him. This involves the notion of a racial education and a conception of the inter-dependence of all social phenomena—the unity of man with nature and the correlation of moral and political theory. Ideas of this import had engaged the minds of thinkers from the time of Plato, but found more or less imperfect expression until the time of Kant and of Comte, the founder of "sociology."

The eighteenth century, spurred by the impetus of the Reformation and the scientific discoveries of the seventeenth century, became engrossed with the revelation of the power and destiny of man. The feeling that man was not an "accident" but the necessary complement of an otherwise incomplete system, gave an added force to the validity of man's ideas. Champions of deistic thought sprang up everywhere: in France, in England, in Germany. But England, owing to the philosophy of Locke, which led to "religious" doubt and abnegation, proved the most prolific source of deism. The "common sense" of Locke led to Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious*, Tindal's *Christianity as old as the Creation*, Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques*, and a host of other French and English followers. The arguments of both the English and the French defendants were soon echoing in Germany and found as ardent supporters there.

It must not be supposed that these deists had much in common besides a fundamental theory that whatever is, is right. They bandied certain stock arguments, such as the absence of an exclusive heaven for believers, which are still heard to-day, and dogmatized and reviled very much in the manner of preceding "Christians." William Law, the mystic, derided rationalism; while Tindal proclaimed that the very attempt to destroy reason by reason, was a demonstration that man had nothing but reason to which to trust.

Lessing, though affected by this deistic development, did not share the tendency to condemn the Jews. What he got of value from the controversy, is the very thing for which a perusal of this work is valuable for us, namely, the point of view. He reveals the essence of eighteenth century individualism in the unity which he perceived in a fully articulated difference. This

makes him a protagonist of *evolution* and *development*. What this means for modern thought can be seen from Leslie Stephen's statements in regard to those concepts: "Whether the development be described as a process of divine education or as an evolution determined by natural laws, it would be equally admitted on all hands that man, in the infancy of the race, was fitted for an order of ideas entirely different from that which would be appropriated at a later epoch. But in all the contemporaries there is a curious inability to accept this view." It is equally hard for us to-day to accept any other. It was, too, Lessing's conclusion.

Thus, though Lessing's theology may repel us, his humanity attracts; though his exegesis may seem tedious and wire-drawn, his exultation is infectious. Like Milton's philosopher, we sit with Lessing in the center and enjoy bright day. We feel the poetry and the rhapsody of the master and revel in the keen analysis and vaticination of a seer. We become rationalistic-romanticists like Nathan, and feel the passion of Novalis and the contemplative placidity of Kant. We see the centuries stretching to dim distance behind and to dim futurity beyond; we feel the hallowed twilight "which a soft evening glow neither quite encloses nor quite reveals." For Lessing saw education in its larger racial aspects, as a genesis, as a social ergon: saw it with a philosophy.

His argument is analogical and has the weakness of analogies. He thinks revelation is education because education reveals God to men, or reveals the unity of nature to man; and revelation does likewise. He thinks revelation is education because education arouses spiritual aspiration; and revelation aroused the rude Hebrews to aspire. He thinks revelation is education because education is not merely writing but an exhibition of the divine; and so is revelation. To be sure, the reader may deny the analogy and puncture the argument, but he can never gainsay or forego the impetus that arises from the conception.

Finally, since, like all considerations of philosophy, this treatise is only a small cross-section of the history of thought, the introduction and notes must be borne with as patiently as may be. Their intrusion occurs only that Lessing's contribution may be able to appear in its completeness.

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PART I

Introduction

Nathan. For Truth!
And wants it hard and bare, as Truth were coin.
Yes, if an ancient coin which went by weight
I grant you! But this coinage of to-day
That's counted down and has no other value
Except the stamp upon it,—that it's not.
Act III. Sc. 6.

An adequate consideration of Lessing's tractate, the *Education of the Human Race*, demands: (1) a resumé of the most important aspects of European thought into which Lessing was born and in which he lived (A), and a review of the chief epochs of his life and the ideas for which he contended (B); (2) the tractate itself. In this way it may be deduced how Lessing came naturally to think as he did; what his ideas actually were; and what those ideas may fairly be said to anticipate or to lead to.

I. A. A resumé of the most important aspects of European thought into which Lessing was born:

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's life extended from 1729 to 1781. Rationalism was then in full career but was slowly being paralleled by naturalism.

The experiments of Bacon and Galileo reinforced by the philosophy of Locke and Descartes, had brought metaphysics in the seventeenth century under the dominion of mathematics and science; and Reason, at whose court Voltaire was later to be such an important functionary, was holding sovereign sway. Out of the philosophy of Descartes had grown that of Spinoza (1632-1677), Leibniz (1646-1716), Wolff (1679-1754) and Rousseau (1712-1778, *Essays* 1750, 1754, *Nouvelle Heloise* 1760, *Social Contract* 1761, *Emile* 1762). Kant (1724-1804) and Herder (1744-1803) were to be the descendants of these.

The line of Pope (1688-1744), "The proper study of mankind is man," is not unaptly taken as indicating the direction of English thought in the eighteenth century, and Minto points