

HUME

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Hume by William Knight

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WILLIAM KNIGHT

HUME

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“H U M E”

BY

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PREFATORY NOTE.

As the title of the Series shows, these 'Philosophical Classics for English Readers' are written, not so much for the initiated, as for those who wish to know something about the great Systems, and their Founders; but who have not leisure to peruse their Treatises in full, or to go into the more recondite aspects of the questions they have raised, still less to master the voluminous critical literature which has subsequently gathered around them.

Probably an increasing number of such readers feel that, as all human knowledge reposes on First Principles—of which Philosophy is the exposition and explanation—some acquaintance with the Speculative Thought of the world is indispensable to every one who would avoid superficiality, or escape from illusion. It is for such that these "short studies on great subjects" are intended. They omit much that would be necessarily included in a full critical discussion, but they aim at such fulness (both of analysis and of criticism) as is consistent with

condensation within prescribed limits, and also at a certain amount of popular treatment.

Few who take up the present volume, for example, will have gone through the late Professor Green's elaborate "introduction" to the works of Hume, or even perhaps have read the whole of Mr Hill Burton's 'Life and Correspondence' of the philosopher; not to speak of more recent critical discussions, English or foreign. The aim of the book is to give to such readers a full and unbiassed picture of the man, and an equally impartial account of his Philosophy—of its sources, its characteristics, and its issues.

Two methods are practicable. Either an account of Hume's philosophical system, and a critical estimate of it, may be woven round the story of his life, and carried on continuously from chapter to chapter, to the end of the volume; or the 'Life' may be detached from the 'Philosophy' altogether. As Hume was not much involved in metaphysical controversy during his lifetime, and as the significance of his system was mainly post-humous, it is easier in his case than in that of any other modern philosopher of note, to separate the biographical sketch, from any but the most cursory account of his system, and to take up the latter by itself. This will accordingly be done. It is true that the gradual development of his system may be traced through the chief incidents of his life; and although, by separating the account of the man from an estimate of his system, there is some risk of repetition when the latter comes to be

discussed, it is to be hoped that a re-statement, so far as it may occur, will tend to further elucidation.

On the most cursory examination of his writings, two things are noticeable. First, they contain few references to his philosophical predecessors. They are neither enriched nor burdened with learning. Secondly, they enter very little into controversy with contemporaries. Hume deals mainly with the perennial aspects of the problems he discusses, and hence the abiding value of his treatment of them.

The delay in the issue of this volume has been a matter of regret. It is not only that the subject has grown larger, the longer it has been studied; but, in collecting materials for another work on the philosophy of Hume, the desire to do justice to both—neither to anticipate the larger by the smaller, nor to lessen any interest the smaller may possess by the reservation of materials for the larger—may explain it.

As to new sources of information in reference to Hume, the author may refer to MSS. in the British Museum, and to the historical MSS. at Newhailes, belonging to Mr Dalrymple, which have been generously placed at his service. He has not, however, been able to obtain access to the volumes of Hume MSS. in the custody of the Royal Society of Edinburgh; the Secretary being of opinion that Mr Hill Burton had sufficiently examined these.

The portrait of Hume prefixed to the volume is a reproduction of one by Allan Ramsay, now in the

National Gallery at Edinburgh. It was painted for Hume as a companion picture to the portrait of Rousseau, which Ramsay also painted for him. The original was presented to the National Gallery by Mrs Macdonald Hume of Ninewells, a grandniece of the philosopher. It is, in all respects, the most characteristic likeness of him that exists. The bust, moulded by a country artist at Professor Ferguson's request, and the medallion by Tassie engraved by Alexander Hay, (which are reproduced in Mr Hill Burton's *Life*), are inferior to it, both in historical interest and expressiveness.

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