

PHILOSOPHY & WAR

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Philosophy & war by Emile Boutroux

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EMILE BOUTROUX

**PHILOSOPHY
& WAR**

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BY

ÉMILE BOUTROUX

MEMBRE DE L'ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY

FRED ROTHWELL

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PREFACE

Is the *rapprochement* of these two words, philosophy and war, a legitimate one? Do not war and philosophy belong to two entirely different worlds? Should we not regard as artificial and incongruous all attempts to find any relation between the manifestations of force and the serene untrammelled speculations of the spirit?

Assuredly, this is not the point of view of the Germans. The official representatives of German science and art have insisted on declaring before the whole of the civilized world that the present war was entered upon and has been waged by Germany in full conformity with the principles of such men as Kant and Goethe, whilst their generals state that the German officer is nothing else than the visible representative, the incarnation, of the categorical imperative. Open one of those numerous and magnificent tear-off calendars for the year 1916, one of the methods of propagandism employed in Germany, and you will find,

on every page, quotations from German thinkers, intended to explain and justify the conduct of their country in this war.

It is but just, also, to state that the Germans themselves regard the war as the culmination of their philosophy.

It would none the less be wholly out of place to render the German philosophers of the past responsible for the use which is now being made of their doctrines. "The same thoughts," said Pascal, "do not always grow and develop in others as they do in their creator." Though the categorical imperative of Kant is at the present time advanced as proof that cruelty ceases to be cruelty when practised on behalf of German discipline, manifestly a like misinterpretation of his ideas cannot be imputed to Kant himself.

There have been world-wide protests against the assumption of the Germans that their present-day doctrines are to be found in the works of their great philosophers. How, for instance, are we to reconcile the doctrine of a head-nation (*Herrenvolk*), destined by providence to have dominion over all others, with the conclusion reached in the political philosophy of Kant: "International right must be based on a federalism of free States" (*auf*

einen Föderalismus freier Staaten)? It cannot be repeated too often that the masters of German thought were idealists, enamoured of truth and devoted to the cause of the spirit, and that their work offers an anticipatory disavowal of the consequences which present-day Germans claim to deduce from it.

Nevertheless, does it follow that to fall back upon the authority of their great thinkers is purely arbitrary on the part of the Germans, and that there is nothing in the writings of these great men to afford the slightest pretext for the present aberrations?

Assuredly, one of the doctrines which contribute most effectively to foster the unrestrained ambitions of the German nation is the belief in the altogether unique and quasi-divine excellence of the German race, of Germanism (*Deutschheit*). Now, there is no doubt that this doctrine was philosophically deduced by Fichte himself, for, in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, he proves that the German people is that very self of the world which is interchangeable with God in his previous writings, and also that nothing but Germanism is capable of producing in this world of ours any real or genuine science or morality at all.

If we examine, along these lines, a number of the great ideas of German philosophy, such as the Hegelian identity of the rational and the real, the Hegelian theory of the State, the Fichtean doctrine of the unreality of a right unprotected by force, the conclusion of Goethe's Faust: "He alone merits life and freedom, who has to win them anew, day by day"; the great Kantian and German principle: the self is constituted only by contrast, the being only realizes itself by struggling against its contrary; or even the doctrine, so general amongst German philosophers, that sin is the first form of activity, that evil is the condition, or even the generator, of good, as night is the mother of light; if we meditate on such principles, we note that whilst, of themselves, they express only metaphysical views, they all the same lend themselves to applications more or less similar to those which the Germans are now making of them.

The Greeks set up the principle that all truth becomes error when exaggerated and not kept within bounds—*i.e.*, when no account is taken of the equally certain truths which limit it. The German mind, however, enamoured of unity and systematization, scorns moderation, and, unchecked, sets forth the

consequences of the principle it has once established as fundamental. The common people believe that, if we would pass from the simple formulæ of theory to the endless complexities of practice, it is always necessary to appeal to good sense. But the German philosopher, who holds the principles of science itself, is superior to good sense; he leaves it to the profane.

It is to be remarked, moreover, that many of the great German theories, such as those just mentioned, are opposed to classic teachings, and have even been established for the very purpose of contradicting them. For instance, the Greeks could never have said that the rational and the real are identical, or that the spirit exists only if realized materially.

Consequently, whilst maintaining that the ideas of the present were not those of the great German philosophers, we are forced to recognize that the theories of these very masters contained germs capable of being developed along the line of these ideas. *Es lag sehr nahe*, according to the familiar expression; it was but a short step, for instance, from the identity of the rational and the real to the justification of the real as such.

Hence, it is both permissible and profitable

to see the connection between the *Kriegsgebrauch im Landkriege* (The German War Book) and German philosophy. Perhaps, in this philosophy, we shall not find the *Kriegsgebrauch* preformed, like a statue represented beforehand in a block of marble, but we shall recognize, in a general and abstract way, the very principles to which appeal is made in the *Kriegsgebrauch*, and shall see that, in some ways, these principles lent themselves to the use now being made of them.

Heine said that Germany was a soul seeking for itself a body. And, indeed, ever since the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, of German nationality, Germany has been aspiring after political unity as the indispensable condition of the establishment of her empire throughout the world. Now, the Germans, by persuading themselves, along with their philosophers, that thought is nothing unless it be realized, and that spirit exists only through matter, came first to determine on realization, under the instigation of Prussia, and then forgot that it was spirit which had to be realized. Faust, perceiving that pure idea did not satisfy the deep need he experienced for life, activity, and power, sells his soul in order to realize its aspirations.