

Nobel Prize in Literature 1908



Rudolf Christoph Eucken

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1908 was awarded to Rudolf Eucken *"in recognition of his earnest search for truth, his penetrating power of thought, his wide range of vision, and the warmth and strength in presentation with which in his numerous works he has vindicated and developed an idealistic philosophy of life"*.

RESEARCH INFORMATION:

Alfred Nobel was a man of action who, during his successful business career in the competing markets of many countries and in the international trade centres, had developed an awareness of the inner contradictions and dangers of modern developments. Mankind still seemed to him to need help, and therefore he thought that the best investment for his own fortune would be to use his interest to support those of whom the future would reveal that - in the words of his will - «mankind profited most from them».

The ambiguity of all human work and its tools or weapons challenged him to a personal deed in behalf of human progress. He knew the enormous usefulness of his own technical inventions for military purposes; therefore, he wanted to support any promising efforts toward international peace. How could his worldly mind have overlooked that all our civilization is full of strife, that it invites abuse as well as proper use, and that it can be turned toward evil as well as good?

His chief interest, however, was the intellectual sphere, despite its inherent contradictions. It appeared to him, the cosmopolitan familiar with the languages and civilizations of France and England, as a complex of arts and sciences, of exact natural science and humanistic belles-lettres. The former he sought to stimulate by supporting discoveries and inventions for the benefit of mankind. Turning to literature with the same philanthropic concern, he established a prize for what he called «excellence in works of an idealistic tendency».

Alfred Nobel was deeply influenced by the outlook of Victor Rydberg's poetry and philosophy. He knew what ideals mean to the human mind, to the will that creates and maintains civilization, cultivates and reaps its fruits, and through the struggle and darkness of life breaks a path toward a new dawn of light and peace. Wherever such ideals are manifested in their infinite variety and strengthen the willingness of men to serve each other - whether in the poet's inspiration, the philosopher's attempt to solve the riddle of life, the historian's biographies, or the work of any scholar or writer that looks toward those ideals as models in his freedom and independence - there one finds the literature that Alfred Nobel had in mind. This literature makes use of whatever art and science can offer, and from it mankind «profits the most» precisely because it mirrors the ideal truth without any regard for the useful. The creations and forms of this literature are as manifold as the ideals, and they are forever new and free.

The Swedish Academy has therefore felt that it acted with the sanction of Alfred Nobel when it decided this year to award the literary prize founded by Nobel to one of the most prominent thinkers of our age, Professor Rudolf Eucken, «in recognition of his earnest search for truth, his penetrating power of thought, his wide range of vision, and the warmth and strength of presentation with which in his numerous works he has vindicated and developed an idealistic philosophy of life».

For over thirty years Professor Eucken has been publishing profound contributions in several areas of philosophy. His activity as a writer has yielded increasingly many and important books as his basic philosophy has become both more coherent and more

comprehensive. Particularly in recent years he has published the works that afford us the most thorough introduction to his thought; moreover, the wider public has received from him uncommonly lucid and powerful expositions of his attempts to resolve the most urgent problems of contemporary civilization. Thus he is in the midst of giving the final shape to his mature thought, and everywhere one can see new ideas which we hope he will be able to develop fully in the near future

I cannot here give a detailed account of Eucken's long and versatile career as a philosopher, because time is short and the subject difficult for one with little knowledge of most of his special fields. I can only make some generalizations and dwell in particular on the historical foundations of his *Weltanschauung* and his views on the meaning of historical processes. Professor Eucken considers history a decisive influence on his philosophy, and it was philological and historical studies that led him toward philosophy. Ever since his early days the actual life of man and society has meant much more to him than the abstractions of mere thought analysis. Unfortunately we shall have to omit many interesting ramifications of his thought in order to get a clear picture at least of its main results.

The confident and rising idealism today in the intellectual life not only of Germany but everywhere on the higher and freer levels of civilized life is very different from those proud constructions which bore that name and which went bankrupt half a century ago with Hegel's magnificent system. It was an attempt to derive the inexhaustible wealth of life and the world from abstract categories and concepts by means of a daring dialectic, and to force all human research, all civilization, under the yoke of a complete system of thought. But closer analysis revealed this attempt to be beyond the competence of the philosophical search for truth, and in fact it accelerated the change to an equally dogmatic materialism.

We Swedes know that even at the zenith of dialectic absolutism Boström directed his logical criticisms toward its basic attitudes. By going back to earlier views both here and abroad, he developed a different outlook which has had its adherents in this country up to the present. There is an indisputable resemblance between his views and those developed by Professor Eucken in his writings. This is not surprising, for they both

represent a basic type that since the earliest days of civilization - notwithstanding temporary eclipses - has preserved its vitality in the face of pantheistic abstractions as well as materialistic fear of thought. But this characteristic agreement in their basic views does not exclude independent and personal development; on the contrary it rather promotes it, and no branch of philosophy has produced so many marked profiles as realistic idealism. Socrates and Plato were led by this idealism to hold that philosophy is a search for truth rather than a fixed dogma, and this tireless search, by whatever means, has characterized philosophy throughout the ages. Thus Eucken and Boström reached their common goal by quite different means.

Since his youth Eucken has carefully observed the busy and steady philosophical attempts to reassess external and inner experience and to gain firm ground again after the collapse of the bold philosophical systems. Philosophy turned in different directions with varying expectations and success. Sometimes the motto was «Back to Kant», and the great metaphysical iconoclast served as a model for thorough studies of the limits of human knowledge, or else one listened hesitantly to his declaration of an eternal realm of reason based on unassailable moral postulates. Again there were attempts to give philosophy a safe position by tying it to the victorious advances of modern science or, more successfully, by independently questioning its presuppositions and methods. There were attempts to discover the secrets of the human soul in its manifestations, whether by observation or experiment, and there was hope that such research would lead toward the discovery of the proper relation of physical and psychological existence.

Eucken has been familiar with all these schools, but his main field has been historical and critical research on the emergence and development of mainstreams of thought in connection with the evolution and change of general culture. Like so many pioneers in his field, he has always been convinced that there can be no true progress without a proper regard for tradition and that there is more to the annals of philosophy than a kaleidoscope of systems rising and falling with equal suddenness. As Eucken has often emphasized, there can be no continuity in philosophy unless it grows like the other

sciences and continually treats and develops the same problems, lest every mind should believe that he could start all over from the beginning only to be replaced by someone else in the same manner.

Apart from collections of monographs and essays in this field, Eucken as early as 1878 published the first comprehensive results of his method. In *Grundbegriffe der Gegenwart* [Basic Concepts of Modern Thought] he discusses the origin, formulation, and development of common modern concepts since the days of ancient philosophy and scholasticism. Such terms are «subjective and objective», «experience and evolution», «monism and dualism», «mechanistic and organic», «law and individuality», «personality and character», «theoretical and practical», «immanence and transcendence». But he is not interested merely in definition of terms; he wants to describe the leading goals and attitudes of a period by elucidating, in his own words, «concepts as a mirror of their time». With each dissection the object becomes more clearly delineated. In the fourth edition, which appeared this year, the scope of the book has widened; it has become a thorough critique of the conflicts in modern civilization; accordingly, the title of the book has been changed to *Geistige Strömungen der Gegenwart* (1908) [*Main Currents of Modern Thought*]. Indeed, the author has developed his own basic ideas in it, and it is a rewarding labour to study them in their wealth and complexity.

A thinker who considers the perennial questions of human civilization from this point of view will soon learn that he cannot solve them either by ignoring their close interrelation or by limiting himself to epistemological questions. Undoubtedly these problems constantly impinge upon each other; they cover the whole of human existence, influence individuals that are particularly susceptible to their importance, and thereby exercise a reforming power over entire communities and ages. The attempt to trace them in their vital and seminal role amounts to giving a comprehensive survey of human intellectual history. At the same time such a project is more conducive to arousing and widening philosophical interest than a mere analysis of conflicting dogmas, schools, and sects. Eucken undertook such a task in *Die Lebensanschauungen der grosser Denker: Eine*

Entwicklungsgeschichte des Lebensproblems der Menschheit von Plato his zur Gegenwart (1890) [*The Problem of Human Life as Viewed by the Great Thinkers from Plato to the Present Time*]. This work, revised and expanded through seven editions, bears witness not only to the depth and scope of Eucken's research but to his mastery of marshalling his thoughts and to the maturity of his style.

Eucken has developed his own philosophy in several works such as *Der Kampf um einen geistigen Lebensinhalt: Neue Grundlegung einer Weltanschauung* (1896) [The Struggle for a Spiritual Content of Life: New Principles of a Philosophy] and *Grundlinien einer neuen Lebensanschauung* (1907) [*Life's Basis and Life's Ideal: The Fundamentals of a New Philosophy of Life*] as well as the more popular *Der Sinn und Wert des Lebens* (1908)[*The Meaning and Value of Life*] and *Einführung in eine Philosophie des Geisteslebens* (1908) [Introduction to a Philosophy of the Mind]. The last mentioned work in particular is a masterly and lucid exposition of his views.

In recent years Eucken has also turned his attention to religious questions, in *Der Wahrheitsgehalt der Religion* (1901) [*The Truth of Religion*] and *Hauptprobleme der Religionsphilosophie der Gegenwart* (1907) [Main Problems of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion], the latter based on three lectures delivered during a theological summer institute at the University of Jena. This year he has developed his ideas about the philosophy of history at some length in a treatise that forms part of the great encyclopaedic work *Die Kultur der Gegenwart* [Contemporary Civilization]. According to hints in recent works he is now planning a thorough re-examination of ethical problems.

His deep insights into history and his significant attempts to relate his own thoughts on the forces of life to the evidence of history place Eucken far above the superficial attitudes that exaggerate and misinterpret the inner meaning of history. These attitudes, at the cost of an unprejudiced love of truth, have become all too common in this century of history.

Furthermore, Eucken sees a threat to civilization in the caricature of historicism, which partly intends to drag all firm goals and higher aims into the whirlpool of a

misunderstood relativity and partly supports the frequent attempts to limit and paralyze the human will by fitting all human developments and achievements into a supposed naturalistic and fatalistic causal nexus. But in contrast to Nietzsche, for instance, he does not believe in the right or ability of the overweening individual to maintain his own will to power in the face of the obligations to the eternal majesty of moral laws. It is not the individual or the superman in his separate existence, but the strong character formed in the consciousness of free harmony with the intellectual forces of the cosmos, and therefore profoundly independent, that in Eucken's view is called upon to liberate us from the superficial compulsion of nature and the never completely inescapable pressure of the historical chain of cause and effect.

In history as well as in his personal existence man has life of a higher nature, a life originating not in nature but existing in itself and through itself, a life of the mind, which is in reality beyond time but which is revealed to us only in temporal manifestations. All true development presupposes some basis of existence. To the extent to which man comes to participate in the intellectual life, he acquires a power that is eternal and above the vicissitudes of time. This eternal life is a realm of truth, for truths with a limited existence are unthinkable. At the same time it is an infinite whole of living power, far above the world as it appears to us but exercising its influence in the world for us and through us. It is not an abstract castle in the air to which we can escape on the wings of a mystical and supposedly logical imagination, but as a wholly living power it confronts our entire personality with an either-or, a choice of the will that makes the evolution of man and mankind a ceaseless struggle between the higher and the lower life.

History is the mirror of mankind's victories and defeats in this struggle, the vicissitudes of which have been due to the self-determination of the free personality. Hence no philosophy of history can predict the future of this struggle. Even the civilization handed to us as a heritage does not survive by itself but demands our persistent and personal struggle for the true and genuine life of the mind. Nothing else can justify and support our endeavours for morality and art and our political and social work.

Utilitarianism,» Eucken says, «which ever form it assumes, is irreconcilably opposed to true intellectual culture. Any intellectual activity degenerates unless it is treated for its own sake.» Although a great admirer and lover of art, Eucken has turned with equal severity against the aestheticism which is preached so loudly in our days and which «infects only reflective and pleasure-loving hedonists». «No art that values itself and its task can afford to condemn morality. A creative artist of the highest order has hardly ever been a follower of an aesthetic view of life.» Our Runeberg is a poet after his heart, for such an outlook «with its indifference to moral values and its arrogant exclusiveness is quite foreign to him». And only those nations, whether great or small, that have created and maintained a civilization full of genuine intellectual life have a contribution to make to mankind. A contribution may be made only by those nations whose future consists not in a vain endeavour to use aterial force and weapons to «transform quantity into quality», but in the ever growing revelation of eternal life within the limits of temporal existence.

Eucken does not reject a metaphysics that tries to express conceptually those things that are accessible to us in the infinite realm of truth and life. But he has not constructed an everlasting system, nor did he want to do so. His philosophy, which he himself calls a philosophy of action, operates primarily with the forces of human evolution and is therefore more dynamic than static. We may regard him as a *Kulturphilosoph* who fully meets the standards and needs of our age.

Professor Eucken - The lofty and scholarly idealism of your *Weltanschauung*, which has found such vigorous expression in your many and widely read works, has justified the Swedish Academy in awarding to you the Nobel Prize in Literature for this year.

The Academy greets you with sincere and respectful admiration and hopes that your future works, too, will bear ample fruit for the benefit of culture and humanity

At the banquet, Harald Hjärne addressed, in German, his personal congratulations to Professor Eucken. He recalled Thuringia and, in particular, the University of Jena, the heart of German humanism, and the relations of that university with the history of the Swedish



Reformation. In his reply, Mr. Eucken spoke enthusiastically about the idealism for which he had struggled and expressed his gratitude toward Sweden and the Swedish Academy.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1908/press.html