

THE SEEKERS

by JESSIE E. SAMPTER

With an introduction by

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THE SEEKERS

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD

BY

PROFESSOR JOSIAH ROYCE, PH.D., LL.D.

I HAVE been asked by the author to say a word by way of introduction to this very interesting record of conversations and inquiries. On the whole, I feel my word to be superfluous; for the book speaks for itself, and every reader will form his own opinion. But since the author has asked for my co-operation, I gladly offer what little I can.

I am a teacher of philosophy at a university. For the most part my own courses are technical in character. Some of my work is with graduate students. I am accustomed to discuss controverted opinions with people who regard philosophy from a skeptical and more or less controversial, and almost always highly critical, point of view. Hence, my own first impression of the work of the "Seekers" and of the leader of their always pleasing inquiries, was mingled with a certain wonder as to the possibility of their

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accomplishing together, as well as they have done, what they undertook. This wonder has changed, as I have become better acquainted with them, into a delight that the tact, the caution, the tolerance and the earnestness of the leader, and the skill and docility of the pupils, could result in setting before us so fine a model of teaching and of learning as here appears. The book is one to encourage every lover of good things, and everyone who wants to see how the minds of young people in this country, and living under good conditions, can be turned toward great questions in such a way as to encourage sincerity, thoughtfulness and the beginnings of true wisdom.

In what little I have to say of this book I ought of course to abstract altogether from such agreement as I indeed feel with the form of Idealism which Miss Sampter represents. The question put to me is the question whether the method of procedure here adopted is one that promises to be genuinely useful as an initiation of young people into the study of deeper questions. I answer that the author seems to have made out her case, and to have proved her faith in her method by her work. The age and the previous training of the "Seekers"—as they are sketched in the author's preliminary statement—once presupposed, this mode of procedure could only prove a help to them. The methods used are an important beginning. If any of the "Seekers" go on to a more advanced study of philosophy, in college or elsewhere, they ought to prove apt learners. If they simply

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turn to life as their further teacher, they should be ready to profit by some of its deepest lessons better than they could otherwise have done. If, upon further inquiry, they incline to other opinions about the world and about life than the ones they have emphasized, they will still always remain more tolerant of the varieties of opinion, and more hopeful of the right and the power of the human mind to grapple with grave issues, than they would otherwise have been. These hours of "seeking" will have opened their eyes to values which are indeed permanent, whatever will be the true solution of the problems of philosophy; and the memory of these hours will prove henceforth a safeguard against cynicism when they doubt, and against intolerance and inhumanity when they believe. And, whatever the truth may be, about God, or about the world, or about life, cynicism in doubt, and intolerance and inhumanity in belief, are great evils, against which the young people of our time need to be guarded quite as much as men needed to be guarded against such evils in the days either of the Sophists or of the Inquisitors. For, in one guise or another, speaking the language of old or of new faith or unfaith, Sophists and Inquisitors we have always with us, either corrupting or oppressing the youth. The methods of our author, as set forth in this book, make for liberty together with seriousness, for self-expression together with reverence, for thoughtfulness together with a sense of deeper values. And in so far the book is a success as

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a model of the way in which our new problems must be met when we have to deal with the young.

If one undertakes to consider such topics with a class as youthful and at the same time as enlightened as the "Seekers," the dilemma is obvious. One must indeed be more or less dogmatic in tone about at least some central interest; one must make use of the persuasive power of a teacher's personal influence; or else one will lead to no definite results. On the other hand, if one propounds one's dogmas merely as the traditional teacher of religion has always done by saying: "This is our faith. This is what you should believe,"—one is then in no case teaching philosophy, and one is hardly helping the young people to "seek." Moreover, such mere dogmas, addressed to young people in whom the period of "enlightenment" has already begun, will tend to awaken in their minds new doubts and objections, rather than to convey to them the positive truth, even if one's own dogmas happen to be true. Hence arises a problem of instruction which cannot be solved in the case of these "Seekers" as we teachers of philosophy often try nowadays to solve our analogous problems in dealing with older pupils in college. Some of us meet our own problems with the older students by directly disclaiming all authority to control their convictions, by asking them to become as self-critical and independent as they can, and by stating our own opinions with the intent *not* to make disciples, but to enable our students to form their own personal judgments through the very

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sympathy with our efforts to be reflective, self-critical and constructive. Thus we do not try to convey a faith so much as to help our students to their own spiritual independence.

In strong opposition to our mode of procedure, many popular teachers of this or that form of "New Thought" have been trying of late to annul modern doubts, and to lead men to a higher spiritual insight by means of certain "intuitions," for the sake of which skeptical inquiry, stern criticism, elaborate reflection must be laid aside; so that the kindly disposed learner, even if he indeed is not to be a believer in certain old-fashioned creeds, still looks to his teacher for a means of quieting his doubts, and so that what is supposed to be "philosophy" becomes a sort of "anæsthetic revelation," with the teacher as the assistant who administers the anæsthetic whereby the pupil is prepared for the surgery of life.

Now, whatever may be the use of such "New Thought" for invalid wrecks, or even for more or less world-weary lovers of the good, whom sad experience has turned away from their earlier religious creeds, and who need to be restored to their courage in facing reality;—still, these anæsthetic methods of the lovers of the "silence" and of the vague light, are *not* suited to the best needs of the enlightened young people, such as these "Seekers" who are about to begin life, who know their little fragments of science, of socialism, and of modern problems, and who want unity with clearness. Nor are such young

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people at just this age yet ready for our more technical academic procedure. Shall they be left then unguided, until their interest in unifying life has been lost in the confusion and variety of their increasing knowledge, until their youthful idealism has been saddened and perhaps soiled by the world, and until their criticism of life has become at once tragic and cynical?

Miss Sampter has undertaken to answer these questions by dealing with the need of just such people. She does so with a genuine clearness of vision, with a careful touch that helps and with a spirit which prepares them to meet their problems, and not to lose unity by reason of the complexities of their situation. She dogmatizes a little, to be sure; and in fact she repeats some of her dogmas not infrequently, without giving any elaborate reasons for these dogmas. They are the dogmas of a metaphysical idealism which I myself in the main accept, but which no direct intuition can very adequately justify, while their technical justification could not possibly be discussed at length in the meetings of the "Seekers." On the other hand, our author is no mere partisan of intuition. Her dogmas are stated in forms that not only win her "plastic youth" to agreement, but challenge them to a reflection which ere long, in some of them, will lead to new interpretations, to doubts, and so, in time, to a higher insight than they at first gain. She sets her pupils to thinking as well as to receiving; they become inquirers rather than passive recipients of

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an intuition. They are thus prepared for a variety of future religious and philosophical experiences, and yet they are kept in touch with that love and hope of unity which alone can justify the existence of our very doubts, of our philosophical disputes, and of our modern complications of life.

As a means of avoiding both of the opposing extremes sketched in the foregoing account of the ways of teaching philosophical opinions, as a *via media* in the work of beginning the philosophical instruction of young people, as a preparation for more critical study, as a conservation of some of the best in the spirit of faith without an undue appeal to mere intuition, and as a model of what can be done to awaken a very notable type of young inquirers such as our modern training tends to produce in the homes of very many of us—this book is, in my opinion, to be very heartily commended.

The educational problem with which it deals concerns meanwhile a very deep and intensely practical interest of our American civilization. We cannot retain the unity of our national consciousness unless we can keep, even in the midst of all the complications and doubts of the modern world, our sense of the great common values of the spiritual world. Without philosophy, our nation can therefore never come to its own. Philosophy does not mean the acceptance of any mere authority. And it will not lead us to universal agreement about any one form of creed. But it will teach us to unite freedom, tolerance, in-

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sight, and spirituality. Without these, of what worth would be mere bulk and mere wealth to our nation? I welcome this book then because our author has contributed to one of the most important of the tasks of our time—the task of helping our nation to regain the now much confused and endangered consciousness of its own unity.

JOSIAH ROYCE

Harvard University, August 3, 1910.