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# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

## PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

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### WHAT IS PRAGMATISM?

THE word pragmatism and the mode of thought for which it stands seem to have come to stay. However 'habitual' humanism may have become with Mr. Schiller, it still seems too 'sporadic and inchoate' with most of us, even after having read his book, to supplant the concise and persuasive term made current by Professor James. It is not, of course, a matter of words merely, but of the type of thought which they represent. For this reason it seems better to employ the term which seems most likely to become common as the designation of the point of view in question. Mr. Alfred Sidgwick in his review of Mr. Schiller's book<sup>1</sup> objects to the name pragmatism as unattractive, but it at least is distinctive, while, as Mr. Sidgwick himself says, "the essence of 'humanism' is not quite easy to find."

Pragmatism seems to appeal to the sense of humor of most of its critics. And the pragmatist is in no way disposed to object to this. As 'a critical study of first prejudices,' it is bound to elicit emotion of some sort, and it were better the feeling of the ludicrous than a more violent emotion. To some of its irreverent opponents, pragmatism seems to stand for the simple principle that any philosophy is better than none, since truth, after all, is simply what we need to live by. And the following are samples of its fundamental concepts: The test of truth is utility: it's true if it works. Hence the final philosophic wisdom: if you can't have what you want, don't want it. For man is the measure of all things. The universe ultimately is a joint-stock affair: we participate in the evolution of reality. Our action is a real factor in the course of events. In the search for truth, we must run the risk of error. Lies are false only if they are found out: a perfectly successful lie would be tantamount to absolute truth. We must 'will to believe.'

It is not the purpose here to examine the truth of any of these statements, but to indicate in a general way what, in recent discussions, the word 'pragmatism' seems to be coming to mean. It has

<sup>1</sup> *Mind*, April, 1904, p. 262.

seemed possible to talk glibly about pragmatism without any very clear idea of what it is. For most persons, who have not made a special study of the subject, the word appears to stand for any practical tendency in philosophy, any tendency of philosophy to conform to the needs and utilities of life in its fundamental principles. And, in a general way, this is a correct idea of what it represents. But to leave the matter thus is to leave it vague and obscure. Pragmatism already is beginning to have a history.

The term for Mr. Schiller in his 'Axioms as Postulates' and in his 'Humanism' seems to refer to any practical, useful or teleological reference in experience. In his conversations with Plato and Aristotle<sup>2</sup> Mr. Schiller credits the origin of pragmatism to a hyperatlatan god by the name of Iames. But he also reminds us that, in some of its basic principles, it is as old as Greek philosophy. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were pragmatists in certain of their teachings. Like the theory of evolution, it has had its advocates from the time of the Greeks to that of Professor James. But it is only in recent years that this mode of thought has come into prominence as a philosophic method. The best brief characterization of pragmatism in Mr. Schiller's book is this: 'Science subordinates itself to the needs and ends of life alike whether we regard its origin—practical necessity, or its criterion—practical utility.'<sup>3</sup> Mr. Schiller thus uses the term in a more comprehensive sense than does Professor James.

According to the original statement of Professor James,<sup>4</sup> pragmatism is a principle of method for estimating the practical value and results of philosophical conceptions. The soul and meaning of thought, he says, can never be made to direct itself towards anything but the production of belief, belief being the demicadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life. Thought in movement has, thus, for its only possible motive the attainment of thought at rest. But when our thought about an object has found its rest in belief, then our action on the subject can firmly and safely begin. Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance. Thus the same thought may be clad in different words; but if the different

<sup>2</sup> Chapter II. on "'Useless' Knowledge" in 'Humanism.'

<sup>3</sup> 'Humanism,' p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> 'Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,' Address before the Philosophical Union of the University of California, published in *The University Chronicle*, September, 1898.

words suggest no different conduct, they are mere outer accretions, and have no part in the thought's meaning. If, however, they determine conduct differently, they are essential elements of the significance. . . . Thus to develop a thought's meaning, we need only to determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought distinctions is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. This is the principle of pragmatism.

Professor James applies this principle as follows: Suppose there are two different philosophical definitions, or propositions, or maxims, or what not, which seem to contradict each other and about which men dispute. If, by supposing the truth of the one, you can foresee no conceivable practical consequence to anybody at any time or place, which is different from what you would foresee, if you supposed the truth of the other, why then the difference between the two propositions is no difference—it is only a specious and verbal difference, unworthy of further contention. There can be no difference which does not make a difference. There is no difference in abstract truth which does not express itself in a difference of concrete fact, and of conduct consequent upon the fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. It is true that a certain shrinkage of values often seems to occur in our general formulas when we measure their meaning in this prosaic and practical way. They diminish. But the vastness that is merely based on vagueness is a false appearance of importance, and not a vastness worth retaining.

Doctor King, in his article on 'Pragmatism as a Philosophic Method,'<sup>5</sup> has criticized Professor James for not extending his pragmatism to the question of the genesis and evolution of knowledge in response to needs, as well as to the question of the validity of knowledge, the test of truth, the worth of the processes set up for supplying those needs. He maintains, virtually, that Professor James had only half done his work in stating the principle of pragmatism. A pragmatic philosophy, he declares, must have a chapter on the genesis and growth of knowledge, as well as on the criteria or tests of its validity.

<sup>5</sup> *Philosophical Review*, September, 1903.

But now, by a curious and amusing confusion, this which Doctor King criticized pragmatism for lacking is assumed by Professor Dewey's critics to be the essence of the doctrine and is regarded as the main purport of the 'Studies in Logical Theory' of the latter. Here are two assumptions: First, that Professor Dewey is a pragmatist. Second, that pragmatism means something quite different from that which Professor James, as the originator of the view, says that it means.<sup>6</sup> Both of these assumptions may prove to be true. But surely it is rather early in the controversy to assume that they are true, as Professor Dewey's critics have done.

We have seen that for Professor James pragmatism means a theory of the test of philosophical conceptions, a theory simply of the practical validation of knowledge. But pragmatism, by these writers, is interpreted to mean that all truth and validity is in response to needs; not only that a thing is true if it works, but because it satisfies a need or demand. That is, pragmatism now seems to mean, in the opinion of its critics, just what Doctor King criticized it for not meaning.

Doctor Sheldon, in his review of the book,<sup>7</sup> assumes that the purport of the 'Studies' is a genetic account, a genetic functionalism. But this misses the whole point of the book. No one as yet has criticized the book from the point of view of that which it sets out to do. Assuming the continuity of experience and the specific reconstructive utility of thinking in the process of experience, the problem is to interpret antecedents, data, forms of thought, entities, existences, realities, from the standpoint of their definition in and through this process of transformation. It, indeed, asserts that the problem of the origin can not be dissociated from the problem of the nature of a thing, that questions of history and questions of validity presuppose one another. But it does not set out to give an account of the origin of anything. It is not a cosmology, as Professor James remarks.<sup>8</sup> Starting with experience as we daily live it, it asks after the law of transformation or reconstruction of that experience. And having found a statement of the process which is, at least measurably, true, it seeks to show what is involved in this way of looking at experience, especially what it suggests with reference to the interpretation of logical categories in terms of the psychology of thinking. It is simply an attempt to get a method which will enable us to state the logic of experience so as to avoid the deadlock of the epistemological antinomies.

<sup>6</sup> Professor James credits Mr. Pierce with the original statement of pragmatism, but the former first gave currency to the term.

<sup>7</sup> JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS, February 18, 1904.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Chicago School,' *Psychological Bulletin*, January 15, 1904.

Professor Baldwin, in his article on the 'Limits of Pragmatism,'<sup>9</sup> also assumes that Professor Dewey is a pragmatist, and makes the further assumption that pragmatism takes one term (the needs) as fixed, and then proceeds to criticize this view for not taking the needs as functional. But this is just Professor Dewey's whole point in the first chapter of the 'Studies.' Professor Baldwin is using Professor Dewey's principle to knock over a hypothetical 'pragmatism' attributed to the latter. Indeed, it appears to the present writer that the defect of Professor James's pragmatism and of Professor Baldwin's æsthenomic idealism is just this which is attributed to Professor Dewey, viz., the setting up of a certain stage or phase of experience (the practical in Professor James's view and the æsthetic in Professor Baldwin's view) as fixed, instead of recognizing that both these belong to the cycle of experience and have existence in this cycle of experience only in a functional sense. Professor Dewey himself insists that the needs are not to be taken as fixed. They require to be explained as much as anything else.

The point of view of Professor Dewey's philosophy, happily, has received no single title up to the present time. One is not quite sure but what it is unpragmatic for its defenders to seek to name the 'new philosophical movement' so soon. There is always a suspicion that when a point of view becomes a school of thought with a definite name, its work is done, and it is on the decline. When it is precipitated and crystallized in specific terms, it is apt to be classified and laid away on a shelf in the museum of the historic systems. Certainly it is the very spirit of the new movement to keep all its categories organic and functional, and this, indeed, is one stumbling-block to many of its critics. They regard this as simply a screen for all sorts of obscurities, ambiguities and confusion. Nor can it be denied that this is a real danger. But when it comes to a choice between accurately classified fossils and the living organism of truth, some prefer the latter, even though it does demand some reconstruction of formal logic.

Pragmatism, through this very criticism of pragmatism, thus seems to be coming to be used in a more inclusive sense, and, in this sense, it seems to be fairly just to regard many writers, in spite of all their differences, as striving for a common goal—what may in general be called a pragmatic theory of experience.

That the word is coming to be used in this larger sense is borne out by the character of the discussions at the recent meeting of the American Philosophical Association at Princeton, where the general subject was one of the prominent topics under consideration. As the term was used on this occasion, it was taken to include in a

<sup>9</sup> *Psychological Review*, Vol. XI., No. 1, January, 1904.

general way the so-called instrumental or functional point of view of what Professor James has called the 'Chicago school.' Professor Creighton in a paper on 'Purpose as a Logical Category'<sup>10</sup> expressed the opinion that this movement, in late years, had assumed proportions that must be reckoned with, and, from the standpoint of analysis of the teleological arguments and the arguments from evolution advanced by certain of these writers, undertook to point out certain inadequacies and inconsistencies in the pragmatic standpoint. Among other things, he said that pragmatism does not do justice to the thought element in experience, and does not give adequate recognition to the category of self-consciousness. He further maintained that pragmatism is essentially individualistic.

The address of the President, Professor Josiah Royce, on 'The Eternal and the Practical,'<sup>11</sup> criticized the general standpoint of the pragmatist from much the same point of view, dealing particularly with the pragmatic test of truth and with the pragmatist's conception of the genesis and function of judgment. In a very interesting way and with much dialectic skill 'pure' pragmatism was shown to be inconsistent and even suicidal. It was admitted, however, that it is doubtful whether such a pure pragmatism anywhere exists. Of more weight was the able critique of the pragmatist's use of the evolutionary argument in support of his position. It was shown that the biological argument from evolution, upon which the pragmatist implicitly relies, is not the real basis of pragmatism but rather a corollary from it. This Professor Royce adduced as an illustration of the inconsistency of the pragmatic scheme. But, doubtless, the pragmatist would accept the alternative, and reply that evolution is simply an illustration of the pragmatic nature and development of experience. With the main thesis of pragmatism as an empirical philosophy of life, that thinking or judgment is the expression of a need, and its function that of working out a solution of the problem presented by this need, Professor Royce expressed himself in hearty agreement. It is only when the attempt is made to generalize this empirical and utilitarian method that he opposes it. As a practical working device for meeting particular situations, he granted it a certain intelligibility and efficiency. But, he said, pragmatism, thus conceived, is purely individualistic. It yields assurance and individualistic success, but it guarantees no objective or social certainty. Its standards are lacking in the essential character of a standard—transgredient reference and verifiability. Thus the consciousness of the 'ought,' Professor Royce maintained, implies and demands an objective, a social, indeed an eternal, conscious-

<sup>10</sup> Since published in the *Philosophical Review*, May, 1904.

<sup>11</sup> *Philosophical Review*, March, 1904.

ness to give the particular and individual judgment that authority which it is the very nature of every judgment to express. For this eternal consciousness and standard of reference pragmatism leaves no place, hence its judgments are merely ephemeral and personal reactions to particular situations, lacking in that universality and necessity which give objectivity to the typical scientific or ethical judgment.

Both papers elicited considerable discussion and the presence of several representatives of the Chicago faculty of philosophy led to the discussion of a number of points raised in the two papers. The main points in this discussion made by those who, in a general way, defended the pragmatic standpoint, were to call attention to the tendency to conceive pragmatism in too narrow a way, in which thought and action (or conduct) are brought into opposition as two distinct spheres, instead of being merely relatively distinct moments or stages in a common process. And instead of being forced by the nature of judgment to postulate an absolute or eternal consciousness in order to give authority to individual judgments, a true view of the really social nature of consciousness (and thus of judgment) shows the necessity of stating the absolute itself in pragmatic terms.

In conclusion, a few things seem clear. The general movement which rightly or wrongly is coming to be designated as pragmatism is away from an intellectualistic and transcendental, toward a voluntaristic and empirical metaphysics. It is thoroughly evolutionistic in its general presuppositions, though critical in its exposition of details of this doctrine. And, finally, it seeks to interpret in dynamic and functional terms the valuable results of the analysis of consciousness which the structural psychology has given us, and turns, for its basic principles of interpretation, to psychogenetic science.

The movement in its broader scope thus includes not only the 'pragmatism' of Professor James and the 'Humanism' of Mr. Schiller, but also the 'functional view' of the representatives of the 'Chicago school,' the 'geneticism' of Professor Baldwin and the 'dynamic realism' of Doctor C. L. Herriek, which is being set forth systematically now for the first time in the pages of this JOURNAL. Mr. Stout's essay on 'Error,' in Sturt's 'Personal Idealism,' also contains much that is in sympathy with a pragmatic point of view.

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