

# MIND

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

OF

PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY.

EDITED BY

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## VII—DISCUSSIONS.

## THE DEFINITION OF 'PRAGMATISM' AND 'HUMANISM'.

His characteristic generosity has prompted Prof. James not only gallantly to come in and take his full share of the obloquy with which these new conceptions have been greeted,<sup>1</sup> but also to try to minimise his own services in their development. And inasmuch as his disclaimer of originality, if uncorrected, might go down as authoritative, I cannot allow him so greatly to understate the debt I owe him. If at the same time I take the opportunity to discuss terms of which the relations are as yet often confused, less by reason of their inherent affinity than because they have found the same expositors, and to give reasons for partially dissenting from the delimitations which Prof. James has proposed, and to stress that the unavoidably personal aspects of my explanations may thereby be sufficiently obscured as to seem tolerable.

In the first place, then, I must confess that indignation at what seemed the blindness of Prof. James's critics in habitually admitting his eminence as a psychologist, but denying the coherence of his philosophic views, was a great stimulus to me in trying to bring out the inner connexion of his scattered dicta about the will to believe, the teleology of perception and conception, the nature of 'necessary' truths, the distinction of immediate and discursive knowledge, etc. The discovery also that a willingness to believe was clearly, in some cases, a condition of the attainment of 'truth,' and a cause of its 'reality,' naturally prompted to an inquiry how far this influence might be traced, and what must be the general nature of an intellect in which such phenomena could occur. When subsequently the pamphlet on *Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results* announced to me the naming of 'pragmatism,' I found acceptance easy. But it seemed natural to generalise also this principle of Peirce and to inquire similarly—What must be the nature of a mind in which practical consequences can become determinants of truth or falsehood? This inquiry led to extensive and deepening doubts of the whole intellectualist interpretation of the nature of knowledge, which has now come to seem to me as inadequate intellectually as its consequences are deplorable ethically, and to be all honeycombed with ambiguities, errors and

<sup>1</sup> In the October number of *MIND*; cf. the June number.

incoherences. Both the critical and the constructive results embodied in *Actions as Postulates* and *Humanism*, moreover, seemed to me to follow so directly and logically from Prof. James's principles that I am still astonished that none of his immediate pupils seized an easy opportunity of anticipating both Prof. Dewey and myself. Since then I have become acquainted with Prof. Dewey's important work, which I take to have finally demonstrated the impossibility of the correspondence-with-reality view of 'truth,' and to ensure the overthrow of Absolutism by weapons wrested from its own armoury, viz., by the very argument it had urged against realism.

This bit of psychical history will perhaps explain why I scruple to restrict 'pragmatism' to its original use. In Peirce's sense it seems to have an extension which it has undoubtedly received, and even in Prof. James's account of the matter it is by no means easy to make the distinction sharp.<sup>2</sup> To say that 'truths should have practical consequences' is very vague, and hints at no reason for the curious connexion it asserts. It is hard, moreover, to see why even the extremest intellectualism should deny that the difference between the truth and the falsehood of an assertion must show itself in some visible way. Even its actual denial, therefore, by over-zealous controversialists, hardly persuades me that Peirce's principle is more than a truism,<sup>3</sup> which hardly deserves a permanent place and name in philosophic usage, and naturally merges and evolves into the wider sense of the term so soon as it is scrutinised.

For to say that a truth has consequences and that what has none is meaningless, must surely mean that it has a bearing upon some human interest; they must be consequences to some one for some purpose. But now, we may ask, *how are these 'consequences' to test the 'truth' claimed by the assertion?* Only by satisfying or thwarting that purpose, by forwarding or baffling that interest. If they do the one, the assertion is 'good' and *pro tanto* 'true'; if they do the other, 'bad' and 'false'. Its 'consequences,' therefore, when investigated, always turn out to involve the 'practical' predicates 'good' or 'bad,' and to contain a reference to 'practice' in the sense in which we have used that term.<sup>4</sup> So soon as therefore we go beyond an abstract statement of the narrower pragmatism, and ask what in the concrete, and in actual knowing,

<sup>2</sup> It did not require the verbal ingenuity of Mr. Joseph's wrestlings with the conception in the last number of *MIND* to convince me of this.

<sup>3</sup> So far as I have observed, Prof. A. E. Taylor alone has denied it outright (*McGill University Magazine*, iii. 2, p. 50). But even he prudently refrains from trying to illustrate how "between two doctrines which are: so far as their consequences in practice are concerned, indistinguishable, there may yet be all the difference between proved truth and demonstrable contradiction".

<sup>4</sup> The strange narrowness of the intellectualists' conception of 'practice' is one of the most painful revelations of the controversy. They always profess at least to take the most sordid views of the 'useful'.

'having consequences' may mean, we develop inevitably the full-blown pragmatism in the wider sense. All that the latter adds is a denial that into the establishment of truths there enters any other process than the valuation of their consequences. Peirce's pragmatism had already implied this process, but left open possibilities that other things also might go to the making of 'truth'. These possibilities are definitely excluded when the Peircean pragmatist asks himself 'What more is there in truth?' and finds that there is *nothing* more.

Hence we may effect a transition from the original assertion that the truth expresses itself in the 'consequences' to the more advanced conclusion that it so expresses itself *fully*, i.e., 'consists' in them, and that if it is really 'true' those consequences are 'good'. By itself, however, and without such further explanation, the word 'consist' may well appear to lack precision, and I myself have never used it. But it refers to a definite situation and to a perfectly consistent attitude towards knowledge. That situation may be referred to, that attitude may be defined, in a variety of ways, according as we approach it by one road or another. I myself have availed myself freely of that right by defining what I call pragmatism, as (1) the thorough and methodical recognition of the influence of the purposiveness of mental life on all our cognitive activities; (2) as the conscious application to the theory of knowledge of the teleological psychology suggested by a metaphysical voluntarism; (3) negatively, as a protest against abstracting from the actual purposiveness of our experience in constructing theories of thought and reality; (4) as the doctrine that 'truths' are values and that 'realities' are arrived at by processes of valuation, and that consequently our 'facts' are *not* independent of our 'truths', nor our 'truths' of our 'goods'.<sup>1</sup> To these definitions I may now also add three of a more distinctively logical complexion, viz., (5) that *meaning depends on purpose*, and Mr. Alfred Sidgwick's pithy formulas that (6) the meaning of a rule lies in its application, and (7), *a fortiori*, that the 'truth' of an assertion depends on its application.

Now it is of course obvious that these definitions are verbally very various, and so sure to bewilder any critic who declines to look beyond the expression to the facts referred to. A thinker however who is really trying to grasp the meaning of pragmatism may find them helpful and may finally discover that for this purpose the expressions are really equivalent. In any case one who has not yet discovered their equivalence has little claim to flatter himself that he understands what the question of pragmatism is about.

Pragmatism then, in this wider sense, refers to the way in which our attributions of 'truth' and our recognitions of 'reality' are established and verified by their working, and sooner or later brought to the definite test of experiments which *succeed* or *fail*.

<sup>1</sup> *Humanism*, p. 8, slightly paraphrased.

i.e., give or deny satisfaction to some human interest, and are valued accordingly. It arises from the original pragmatism by the growth of the conviction that no other processes need be appealed to to account for the truths that are current, and expands the original 'estimation by consequences' into a general view of the mind and its cognitive activity. In other words pragmatism rests on facts which may easily be observed by any one who chooses to watch any process of actual knowing ending in the establishment of a claim to truth. The method by which the 'true' is discriminated from the false is plainly pragmatic, and has always been instinctively employed, though a full philosophic consciousness of its character has only recently been attained. And on the whole 'pragmatism' seems the best name for this method which has so far been suggested.

This wider pragmatism, moreover, embodies a very important truth just now, because, oddly enough, it has not yet been discovered to be both a fact and a truism. I have long waited in vain for its critics to ferret this out, and can only put down their failure to the fact that they are still too excited to have observed how very innocuous a principle it really is. Instead of subverting all but the most grossly useful forms of knowledge it really vindicates all, but a few metaphysical phrases which have no genuine sphere of application, and so can hardly be said to mean anything. Nevertheless, even here, some of the fundamental assertions are hardly in dispute. No critic of pragmatism has, I believe, directly denied either the omnipresence of psychological interest or the dependence on psychical satisfaction, which together pervade all intellectual functioning. The corollaries therefrom doubtless have not been perceived, and Prof. Taylor, and perhaps a few others, have evinced a tendency to suppose that what they imagine to be a 'disinterested' interest in 'pure' thought and 'useless' knowledge, and a (presumably unreciprocated) affection for Absolutes are somehow not to be counted as cases of emotional interest, but to be classified apart from the common herd of psychological motives. Such fancies, however, are as untenable as Kant's 'pure respect for the moral law,' and when the epistemological consequences of admitted psychological principles are calmly traced out, it will be seen that pragmatism is inevitable, and must gradually win its way to universal acceptance.

As regards what I have proposed to call Humanism, however, the situation is very different. Ideally, no doubt, it too should be a truism, for if all philosophers were reasonable and devoid of human frailties it would, as Prof. Dewey has remarked,<sup>2</sup> be assumed as obvious that the nature of man must be presupposed in all man's reasonings. But actually, as Prof. Dewey well points out, this assumption is bitterly contested. And this probably will always

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dewey's 'instrumentalism' might perhaps be substituted were it not so open to linguistic and æsthetic objections.

<sup>2</sup> *Psychological Bulletin*, i., 10, pp. 336-337.

be the case. For even a slight familiarity with the psychology of philosophers will make it seem extremely unlikely either that they will ever universally consent to use man's integral, unexpurgated nature whole-heartedly, as a premiss in their lucubrations, or view its satisfaction as the conclusion to be reached, or that if they did so consent, they would reach concordant results. Some Humanists probably there will always be; indeed my knowledge of their numbers has been notably enlarged since my scientific caution and modesty dared not vouch for more than two. But to be a Humanist there will always be needed a certain whole-souled temperament, odious to the *idea* intellectualist, and (because of their mode of life) this will always continue to be rare among technical philosophers, though no doubt in future the instinctively humanistic nature will be permitted better opportunities of growth than heretofore, even when it finds itself engaged in an academic career. And so for a long time to come we must expect still to see the great principle of Protagoras maligned or perverted by those congenitally unfitted to appreciate it.

There will consequently be many pragmatists who cannot rise to Humanism; nor indeed is there any logical necessity why they should do so. It is quite possible to accept pragmatism as an *epistemological method* and analysis, without expanding it into a general philosophic principle: ~~No man can be compelled to have a metaphysic~~ (else there would be no need for a Mind Association!), or at least to be conscious of it. Any one can, if he chooses, stop short on the epistemological plane, as he can on that of science or of ordinary life. If, on the other hand, he proceeds to become a Humanist, he will no doubt regard his pragmatism as merely a special application of a principle which he applies all-round, to ethics, aesthetics and theology, as well as to the theory of knowledge. Clearly, therefore, we must distinguish Humanism even from the wider pragmatism.

But in the case of every philosopher who builds out his convictions into a 'system' there will always be much that is not deducible from any objectively formulated principle, and (whether he knows it or not) is subjective and idiosyncratic, due to his personal experience and personal reactions on the food for thought which his life affords. For example, in the present state of our knowledge, his interest in the question of a future life must largely depend on whether he has or has not found his life worth living. And generally it must be recognised that a philosophy is always in the last resort the theory of a life, and not of life in general or in the abstract. There is no reason, therefore, to anticipate that the adoption of Humanism (or even of Pragmatism) will at all diminish the number and variety of systems. Personally, indeed, it would

<sup>1</sup> *Humanism*, p. xvi. It grieves me to think that Prof. Dewey (*loc. cit.*, p. 335) should have misapprehended my remark. However, I am delighted to welcome him and others: the more we are the merrier we shall be, and the rosier the prospects for a '*fröhliche Wissenschaft*'.

seem to me to argue abysmal conceit and stupendous ignorance of the history of thought to cherish the delusion that of all philosophies one's own alone was destined to win general acceptance *ipsissimis verbis*, or even to be reflected, undimmed and unmodified, in any second soul.

But the existence of this personal element should render critics all the more cautious to discriminate between what is due to it and to the more objective factors in a 'system'. To quarrel with its idiosyncrasies is no way to refute its fundamental principles: in discussing these, such *personalities* are always more or less irrelevant. Now in the present controversy I cannot but think that our critics have often allowed *our* idiosyncrasies to bulk so largely as to obscure the main issues: a procedure which may be partially excused by the accidental fact that there happens to be an unusual amount of coincidence between Prof. James's personal 'over-beliefs' and mine. But much as it would flatter one's *Wille zur Macht* to get them all securely tied on to the new philosophy, and participating in its success, such things as, *e.g.*, interest in Psychical Research, are not really of the essence of Pragmatism or even of Humanism, and it was, therefore, quite a relief to me to find Prof. Dewey pointedly dissociating himself from some of my most cherished convictions.<sup>1</sup> For really, if there is to be healthy progress in philosophy, we must have more tolerance, less party-spirit, no cast-iron creeds, and (in a word) no more absolutism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 335.