

MIND

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

OF

PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY.

EDITED BY

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complete survey of the categories and their connexion; but this *Wissenschaft der Logik* will probably never be completely written. In the meantime, it is perhaps better if philosophy, as critic of the sciences, is content to derive its matter from them and to prophesy in part."

S. H. MELLONE.

Pragmatism, a New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking: Popular Lectures on Philosophy. By WILLIAM JAMES. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907. Pp. 309.

PRAGMATISM, according to Dr. James, is both an "attitude of orientation" and a theory of truth. As an attitude of orientation it is "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (p. 54).

The first part of this does not describe Dr. James's position, while the second describes the position of every philosophy without exception. Pragmatism is itself a principle, the author's explanation of it involves numerous categories, and the course of his argument continually rests on asserted necessities. On the other hand all philosophies endeavour to describe and explain facts, including those which are the fruits and consequences of other facts. What is meant by first and last things—whether a temporal or logical order is spoken of—seems doubtful. But on either interpretation Dr. James deals with first things, as well as last, and all philosophers deal with last things as well as first.

We pass to Pragmatism as a theory of truth. And in this, the central part of the book, the difficulties of criticism are increased by the fact that Dr. James, though always picturesque, is very far from lucid. We find on page 45: "The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the observations mean practically the same thing; and all dispute is idle." On the next page it is said, "Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that, to develop a thought's meaning, we need only 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, however subtle, 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 conceivable effects of a 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, whether immediate or remote, is then for

us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all."

It does not seem clear from this whether "I have a bad headache" means practically the same thing as "I have not a bad headache" in the case where my conduct would remain the same with and without a headache. On the one hand, we are told that the conduct a belief is fitted to produce is its sole significance. The difference then, it would seem, would have no significance. On the other hand it would certainly "make a difference" to me whether I had a headache or not, and the "sensations I am to expect" would be different. And this seems to indicate that the difference has some significance.

If this ambiguity were cleared up we should know in what cases one position can be said to be true and another to be false. But which of them is true, and which false?

Truth, according to Dr. James, is a quality of nothing but beliefs. "The facts themselves . . . are not true. They simply are. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them" (p. 225).

No one ever supposed that truth was a quality of facts in the sense in which Dr. James employs the word "facts"—a sense which seems to be the most convenient use of the word. But when he confines truth to beliefs he denies the existence, between the facts and the beliefs, of an intermediate class of realities called propositions, some of which are true and some false. The reality of these "propositions" has been discussed by Mr. Russell and Mr. Moore. My own opinion is that Dr. James is right in rejecting them, but the question is very difficult, and it seems unfortunate that he should have asserted his conclusion without attempting to meet the arguments on the other side. Perhaps, however, he regarded them as too abstruse for a popular course.

What, then, is the difference between a true belief and one which is not true. "Truth is one species of good, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons" (p. 75).

This first sketch is worked out in the chapter on The Notion of Truth. Here we read: "Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their agreement, as falsity means their disagreement, with reality." Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with" (p. 198).

The first thing that we learn as to the nature of agreement is that it is, in some cases, though not in all, a process of copying. "Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut

your eyes and think of yonder clock on the wall; and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial" (p. 199).

There is a verbal inconsistency between these passages and the two quoted above, which call truth a quality of *beliefs*. Here, we are told, it is a quality of *ideas*. But this is probably a mere slip of the pen, and we shall get Dr. James's meaning by reading "beliefs" in these cases likewise.

A belief is true as far as it is good for assignable reasons, and it is true as far as it agrees with reality. Dr. James has therefore to show that to be good for assignable reasons and to agree with reality either mean the same thing, or if not, are so connected, that one must be true of everything of which the other is true, and to the same degree. (Goodness is, of course, a matter of degree, and so is agreement with reality, as treated by Dr. James.)

Moreover, when we are dealing with sensible things, he will have to prove that a belief which is a faithful copy of a sensible thing is always a better belief than one which is an imperfect copy of that sensible thing. For in this case the true belief has been stated both to be the good belief, and to be the belief which copies the sensible thing.

A belief agrees with reality, according to Dr. James, when it "works". This short and convenient phrase is found on page 216, but he has already given two descriptions of this agreement. When our ideas agree with reality, he says, on page 201, "they lead us through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards other parts of experience with which we feel all the while—such feeling being among our potentialities,—that the original ideas remain in agreement. The connexions and transitions come to us from point to point as being progressive, harmonious, satisfactory. This function of agreeable leading is what we mean by an idea's verification." And again "To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed" (p. 212).

These two definitions do not seem quite consistent. The first suggests that the good which is truth may be one which makes the belief good intrinsically. The belief is good because it leads in an "agreeable" manner, which would be an intrinsic good. But the second suggests that the goodness of the belief is merely goodness as a means. It is good only because it is a means to good action. In either case, however, goodness of some sort comes in, as constituting agreement, and the definitions of truth on pages 75 and 198 are thus held to be harmonised with one another.

Let us suppose that I believe that God is powerful, and that this belief is true. What does this belief tell me about? It professes to tell me about God. But, according to Dr. James, it does not do so. For the truth of the belief is the agreement of the belief with

reality, and this agreement is that the belief works. And when we inquire what we should learn by knowing that the belief that God is powerful works, and turn to the definitions on pages 201 and 212, we find that we should learn a great deal about the belief but nothing about God or about power. Thus Dr. James's position leads to the singular consequence that an assertion about anything is never an assertion about that thing, but about something quite different.

And this singularity leads to difficulties. "God is powerful" is true. This means, according to Dr. James, that the belief that God is powerful works. The working of the belief is not the cause or reason, nor the effect or consequence of the truth. It is not connected with the truth of the belief in any way. It is the truth. Then what I mean when I say that God is powerful is that the belief that God is powerful works. My assertion is changed into an assertion about my belief.

But an assertion about a belief, like any other, will mean that a belief about it will work. So my assertion has now changed into an assertion that the belief "the belief that God is powerful works" does itself work. We are now making an assertion about the second belief. And this assertion is again an assertion that the belief "the second belief works" does itself work. And so on *ad infinitum*. No assertion can have any meaning. For, according to the theory before us, if it had a meaning it would not mean that meaning, but something about the belief in that meaning.

With regard to "ideas of sensible things" an obscurity arises. Suppose that X sees a lion on the point of devouring, as he supposes, a stranger. X is about to shoot the lion, when he recognises that the victim is not a stranger, but his dearest friend. In his increased agitation his hand trembles, and his bullet kills his friend, instead of the lion. Is his recognition of his friend a true belief or not? On the one hand it would seem that his perception of his friend's features is what Dr. James would call a copy of a sensible thing, and so the belief would be true. But there seems to be no "agreeable leading" in such a belief, and X certainly does not "handle either" his friend "or something connected with" his friend better than if he had not had the belief. On the contrary the belief causes him to fail in a purpose in which he wishes to succeed and in which it would be generally admitted that it would be well that he should succeed. Does the belief "work" then, according to either definition? And, if it does not work, is it true?

Dr. James offers two arguments for his position. The first is that certain other systems have broken down. Of the "copy theory" he holds that it is true in some cases and only in some. It seems to me—though the subject is too wide to discuss here—that he concedes too much. The "copy theory" has seized a very important element of all truth, and seems to me in every case much closer to a correct solution than the theories either of Dr. James or

of Dr. Baillie. But in no case can it be accepted as actually the correct solution.

For the rest Dr. James criticises, rather casually, two systems which, if his view of them is correct, share the fundamental vice of his own system, since they endeavour to reduce truth to an ethical conception. And he notes that Mr. Joachim is incompletely satisfied with his own position. But even supposing that "the copy-theory," Prof. Taylor, Prof. Rickert and Mr. Joachim had all been proved wrong, we should not have got much nearer to proving that Dr. James was right.

This second argument, if I understand him rightly, is an appeal to the common belief that truth is good. "Surely," he says (p. 76), "you must admit this, that if there were no good for life in true ideas, or if the knowledge of them were positively disadvantageous, and false ideas the only useful ones, then the current notion that truth is divine and precious, and its pursuit a duty, could never have grown up or become a dogma. . . . What would be better for us to believe! This sounds very like a definition of truth. It comes very near saying 'what we ought to believe': and in that definition none of you would find any oddity. Ought we ever not to believe what it is better for us to believe? And can we then keep the notion of what is better for us, and what is true for us, permanently apart?"

So far, however, from the general sense of mankind accepting 'what would be better for us to believe' as a *definition* of truth, they do not even accept it as a proposition universally true about truth. (It seems worth while to point out that not every proposition which universally holds of a subject can be taken as a definition of that subject.) "Smith is a fool, but happily his wife thinks him a wise man." "That boy is exceptionally clever, and unfortunately he knows it." All of us are continually hearing judgments of this type, and most—if not all—of us are continually making them. And they affirm that in certain cases it is better not to believe the truth, and even better, sometimes, to believe the contrary falsehood.

True beliefs are indeed in most cases considered good. But when they are considered good it is always for a reason. Either they are held to be good for a reason unconnected with their truth, as when a man says "God exists, and, even if he did not, it would be well that we should believe he did." The reason here, whatever it may be, has no relation to the truth of the belief. Or else their truth is the reason, or an essential part of the reason. "The world is very evil, and, since it is so, I am glad that I have found it out." "It is desirable to know that that chair is in a draught, since it is in a draught." Such statements as these last two imply that if the world was not evil, or the chair not in a draught, the beliefs in question would not be good.

Such judgments, that true beliefs are good, are so far from confirm-

ing Dr. James's position that they are quite incompatible with that position. If the goodness of a belief is independent of its truth, the truth cannot be identical with the goodness. And if the truth of a belief is the reason of its goodness, again its truth cannot be identical with its goodness.

Dr. James now restates the position of Pragmatism. "The alternative between pragmatism and rationalism, in the shape in which we now have it before us, is no longer a question in the theory of knowledge, it concerns the structure of the universe itself." The new form is as follows: "The import of the difference between pragmatism and rationalism is now in sight throughout its whole extent. The essential contrast is that *for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making, and awaits part of its completion from the future*" (p. 257).

This appears to be held by Dr. James to be, not an independent doctrine to be believed as well as the Pragmatist theory of truth, but a consequence of that theory. But I cannot see any connexion. If any one held the Pragmatist theory of truth, and at the same time denied the reality of time (a position which would not, I think, present greater difficulties than are essential to all Pragmatism) he would have to deny the "plasticity" of the universe, as formulated above by Dr. James. On the other hand, any one who accepted the reality of time, whatever his theory of truth, would have to admit that the universe was still in the making.

Dr. James appears to confuse the doctrine that existence is timeless (which is held by some rationalists, but has nothing to do with their theory of truth) with the doctrine that there is a timeless truth apart from our beliefs (which is part of the theory of truth of some rationalists). The two doctrines are often held separately. Mr. Moore holds the second without the first, and I myself hold the first without the second.

The second doctrine is quite consistent with the assertion of the plasticity of the universe. According to this doctrine there is a true proposition "the date of the battle of Waterloo is the 18th June, 1815," which is quite a distinct reality from the battle, on the one hand, or any person's knowledge, on the other hand. And this true proposition is eternal and unchanging. But the doctrine does not deny that the battle, and the knowledge, are separate realities from the proposition. And if time is real, *those* realities change. The universe was really different during the battle, and after the battle. And it is also really different, though not so much so, every time that a fresh school-boy learns, or forgets, the date.

J. ELLIS McTAGGART.