

# PRAGMATISM\*



NEW name for some old ways of thinking, pragmatism is to philosophy what a court of arbitration is to capital and labour; it attempts to mediate between arrogant rationalism and complacent common sense. Essentially independent, it follows neither the professional philosopher on his high *a priori* road, nor the man in the street with his cock-sure notions of truth; rather does it strive to tread a path between the two, a *via media* from which may be obtained the ideal outlook of the one and the concrete practicality of the other. In this rôle of mediator pragmatism exhibits its adaptability to modern demands, finding the world sick of abstractions and, at the same time, uninspired by the current scientific beliefs, it offers itself as a tonic to tired minds, a pungent compound which will restore the jaded appetite for the speculative life. Here it claims efficiency for the most opposite types of men—the rationalists, who go by principles, the empiricists, who go by facts—for it seems to possess a remarkable insight into the varied symptoms of each. Assuming individual rationalists to be devotees to abstract and eternal principles, and individual empiricists to be lovers of facts in all their crude variety, the pragmatist describes the one as intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, dogmatical; and the other as sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, sceptical.

This is the table of contrasted traits drawn up by the most recent exponent of this most recent phase of thought. Given this table, and postponing the question whether it be coherent and self-consistent or not, Professor William James holds that the antagonism between the two types forms a part of the philosophic

atmosphere of the time. Describing the one type as tender-minded and the other as tough-minded, he continues: "The tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft-heads. The tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal. Their mutual reaction is very much like that that takes place when Bostonian tourists mingle with a population like that of Cripple Creek. Each type believes the other to be inferior to itself; but disdain in the one case is mingled with amusement, in the other it has a dash of fear." This inimitable description suggests the story of the rise of pragmatism in this country. To reconcile the ways of thinking between the wild Westerner and the effete Easterner, there arose half way between the two what has been called the Chicago School, headed by Professor Dewey. This school, perceiving that both concrete facts and abstract principles were good, sought to attain a system which would combine the excellences of each. Here the prime criterion was declared to be practicality. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," says pragmatism, "what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life? How will the truth be realised? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash value in experiential terms?" With this emphasis on practicality, pragmatism now attempts to resolve certain dilemmas of philosophy, inasmuch as it counts itself most useful in its method of settling metaphysical disputes, which otherwise might be interminable. Avoiding the barrenness of transcendental idealism, it seeks to unstiffen discussion by giving up the pretence of finality in truth, and simply asking, in regard to any question, "What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?" Here a learned opponent, adopting a sort of slang which pragmatism does not disdain to use, has defined its idea of truth as "any old thing that works." Thus he imagines a rustic visitor to the city, who, seeing that an uplifted hand will stop a trolley car, tries

\*Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking. Popular Lectures on Philosophy. By William James. New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1907. Pages xiii. + 309.

the same symbol in front of an automobile, and—the police gather up his fragments. Such a man, it is unnecessary to say, is not a pragmatist, for the essence of pragmatism is success. Now, apply this method to any historic system and observe the result. Take transcendental idealism; it may be inspiring to an ardent believer, but is such a belief to an ordinary man anything more than a cold-storage system of truth? Like the Christian Science formula, "One life, one truth, one love, one principle, one good, one God," the purely rational conception of reality, as ready-made and complete for all eternity, may possess an emotional value, but intellectually it is no solution of this present world, with all its bewilderments, surprises and cruelties. In a word, continues Professor James, rationalistic systems are remnants of artificiality, too refined to satisfy the empiricist temper of mind. So we find men of science preferring to turn their backs on metaphysics as on something altogether cloistered and spectral, and practical men shaking philosophy's dust off their feet and following the call of the wild. But this is too fast, concludes the advocate of pragmatism; the man of science needs philosophy; he may give up "God" and the "Absolute," but he still calls upon "Matter" and "Energy." The practical man also needs philosophy; he may give up the flamboyant optimism of his salad days, but he still needs something to cheer him on his way. Here pragmatism offers itself as mediator and consoler, to satisfy both kinds of demands. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but, at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts. Pragmatism means, then, not the bare presentation of abstract outlines, but a helpful method of tracing specific consequences of any given hypothesis. Assuming the empiricist attitude, it turns toward concreteness and adequacy, toward fact, toward action, and toward power. How is one to choose, say, between optimism and pessimism? By its effects on practical living, responds the pragmatist; one naturally accepts the former doctrine because it gives a happier view of this sorry world. Or, again, what practical difference does

it make now that the world should be thought to be run by spirit or by matter? In the one case there would be the hypothesis of an eternal perfect edition of the universe coexisting with our finite experience, in the other the hypothesis of blind physical forces, bits of brute matter unconsciously following their particular laws. Between theism and materialism, thus presented, it is impossible to choose hypothetically, but apply the principle of practical results and there is vital difference. The one hypothesis is pessimistic, its sun sets in a sea of disappointment; the other is melioristic and means the preservation of our ultimate hopes, since it is not a blind force, but a seeing force, which runs this universe. So, likewise, with the controversy between determinism and free will; pragmatism rids one of Puritanism, drives away the vapours of a bilious conscience, and puts man, if not on the road to perfectibility, at least into the fresh fields of independent action.

But it is in the ancient problem of "the one and the many" that pragmatism claims to reach the most comfortable conclusions, despite certain palpable inconsistencies. Accepting design, free will, the absolute mind, spirit instead of matter, because they have for their sole meaning a better promise as to this world's outcome, it suddenly abandons this monistic point of view and takes up with a pluralistic. This at first appears unnatural; it is as if an American of the strict constructionist type should suddenly give up the idea of the paramountcy of the federal government and become a violent advocate of States' rights. And yet this apparent reversal of judgment has its reasons, namely, the temperamental preferences of the author for that rich medley of facts called the world, rather than for that risky monistic dogma of an absolutely perfect universe. Here the monist might be compared to the protectionist, who argues that if one break be allowed in the sacrosanct Dingley system, the whole will fall to the ground. Wherefore to the philosophic stand-patter pragmatism comes in to unstiffen his theories, to show that this is no more the best of all possible worlds than the present is the best of all possible administrations, and that pluralism, like States'

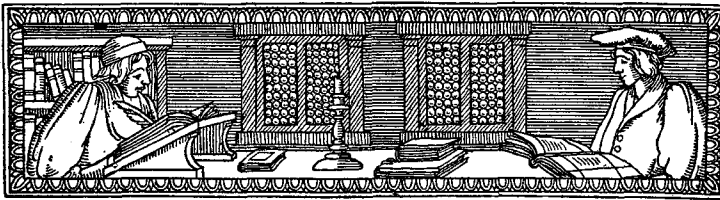
rights, is necessary to allow that free play of parts so conducive to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Pragmatism, then, it is said, pending the final empirical ascertainment of just what the balance of union and disunion among things may be, must obviously range itself upon the pluralistic side and sincerely entertain the opposite hypothesis of a world imperfectly unified still. Hence, the actual world, instead of being complete "eternally," as the monists assure us, may be eternally incomplete and at all times subject to addition or liable to loss.

These views of Professor James on the fundamental problem of the one and the many will, of course, be criticised, for he fully expects to see the pragmatist view of truth run through the classic stages of a theory's career, first being attacked as absurd; then admitted to be true but obvious and insignificant; finally, seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it. Thus, if one might forecast its future, pragmatism will very likely be dubbed a mere progressive pantheism; then explained away as a revival of the ancient Greek conception of cosmic fluxility, of a plastic principle in nature; finally, claimed to be the only, original American philosophy, despite its brilliant advocates in England and Italy. But to confine one's attention to the first stage, pragmatism at the present moment does not seem so absurd as its opponents think. Conventional monism, with its insistence on eternal principles and fixed archetypes, will be hard pressed to explain away that mutability in nature, that changing pageantry in earth and sky, from which native writers like Emerson and Whitman drew their philosophies. As an acute

critic has observed, the notion of a finished world is as hard to grasp as the notion of a finished waterfall. Or, to carry out the figure, instead of being immutable, a frozen river of reality, truth is ever in mutation, ever carried forward on the flowing stream of consciousness.

All this seems a fair construction to be put upon pragmatism in its latest exposition; it has been found judicial because acting as a mediator between rival theories, independent because rejecting the orthodox ontologies, practical because insisting upon an account of truth which has a cash value. But lest the latter characteristic appear too commercial, too much in the nature of a transaction in the Chicago clearing house, the Eastern exponent of pragmatism concludes with a defence both typical of his locality and suggestive of his intellectual heritage. Feeling, indeed, the immense pressure of the objective control of things, resolving to test his notions of truth by their material utilities, he yet allows the value of subjective principles of pure reason and the worth of such spiritual inspirations as "over-beliefs" and "faith-ventures." Herein the author exhibits traces of a transcendental environment and even of a mystical heredity. Reasoning from pragmatic principles that we cannot reject any hypothesis, if consequences useful to life flow from it, he finds that the use of the Absolute is proved by the whole course of men's religious history, and following the lead of Henry James, the elder, he appears, in his doctrine of meliorism, to revert to that Swedenborgian type of thinking which conceived the world as a progressive spiral of perfectibility.

*I. Woodbridge Riley.*



# THE BOOK MART

## READERS' GUIDE TO BOOKS RECEIVED

### *American Book Company:*

American Book of Golden Deeds. By James Baldwin.

A record of deeds of bravery and heroism performed by Americans for America. Some of these stories are merely familiar legends rewritten, but the greater part of the book, it is said, will be entirely new ground to the reader.

Outline for Review of Roman History. By Newton and Treat.

Outline for Review of Greek History. By Newton and Treat.

Presenting the essential points of Roman and Greek history. Fifty typical questions from college entrance examination papers have been included.

Mathematical Geography. By Willis E. Johnson.

Educational. This is intended as a text-book in high schools, academies and normal schools; also for the guidance of teachers.

### *Appleton:*

The Younger Set. By Robert W. Chambers.

To be reviewed elsewhere in this number.

### *Bobbs-Merrill Company:*

Empire Builders. By Francis Lynde.

To be reviewed elsewhere in this number.

### *Broadway Publishing Company:*

Grinmar. By Nathaniel Kussy.

With its scene laid in an ancient and lonely castle in England in the sixteenth century and its characters men who breathed the passionate spirit of the times, *Grinmar* consists of the third and fourth acts of an unpublished play made into a novel.

### *Century Company:*

Brunhilde's Paying Guest. By Caroline Fuller.

The Paying Guest is a young New Yorker, who has sought refuge and rest in a quiet Southern home. His hostess, or "landlady" as he at first styles her, is an ideal type of womanhood and he soon falls in love with her despite the disparity in their ages, she being eight years his senior. It is subsequently discovered that the New Yorker is a Southerner born, and his ancestral estates are near

at hand. The traditional family ghost is introduced in the shape of the Whirling Woman. Ultimately he wins the reluctant consent of Brunhilde and marries her. The book is full of numerous other complicated love affairs.

Clem. By Edna Kenton.

To be reviewed elsewhere in this number.

### *Thomas Y. Crowell and Company:*

Week on the Concord. By Henry D. Thoreau.

Walden. By Henry D. Thoreau.

Excursions. By Henry D. Thoreau.

Cape Cod. By Henry D. Thoreau.

A bijou edition of the collected works of Henry Thoreau.

Stories from Morris. By Madalen Edgar.

Stories of Early England. By E. M. Wilmot-Buxton.

Stories from Chaucer. By J. W. McSpadden.

The first three books in a new series.

### *G. W. Dillingham and Company:*

The Making of a Successful Husband. By Caspar S. Yost.

This volume is evidently intended for the improvement of husbands. The subject is dealt with in the form of letters which a father who has committed matrimony successfully writes to his son. They treat various subjects—whether it is better to board or keep house, the wife's allowance, the bride's relations, and should women work.

### *Doubleday, Page and Company:*

Memoirs and Artistic Studies of Adelaide Ristori. Rendered into English by G. Mantellini. With Biographical Reminiscences by L. D. Ventura.

A resumé of the remarkable dramatic career of Madame Ristori. She tells many intimate anecdotes of the principal personages of her times and of her "confrères" Rachel, Ernesto Rossi, Tomasso Salvini, Edwin Booth and other prominent figures of the nineteenth century. Madame Ristori also makes a critical analysis of many of the famous plays in which she appeared. This is a companion volume to *The Memoirs of Madame Vigée Lebrun*.

The Lone Star. By Eugene P. Lyle.

A romance about the making and makers of Texas, introducing Crockett, Houston, Santa Anna, and other less noted historical figures.