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IS THERE THEORETIC TRUTH?

In looking over recently a series of essays (not yet collected) which have all some reference to the branch of philosophy called Theory of Knowledge, I became aware retrospectively that they have a negative as well as a positive character in common. The positive character is the dominating conviction that the controversy between the principles of Reason and Experience has been brought historically to an approximate solution. The negative character is that, without consciously willing the exclusion, I have never found occasion to discuss the attitude of any thinker expounded, or even incidentally cited, to the doctrine called pragmatism, now acclaimed, by the most vocal portion of the world of culture, as triumphant over the whole past thought of the human race.

Pragmatism, as I understand from its latest expositors, holds that all knowledge is essentially

1 Especially marked in the article on “Reason” contributed to the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (1918).
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directed to practical ends, is in short a mode of business (πράγματα). Truth is simply one kind of “biological value”—a belief which it is useful to hold for self-conservation or social conservation in the life of action. The views stated by the pragmatists, however, are so mixed with older points of view that I was once led to suggest that they have reintroduced, against the austerer theory of Baconian induction, which demands immersion in facts given from without, a new permission of intellectual adventure.1 This apparent concession to the speculative metaphysician I welcomed, and was almost ready to call myself in that sense a convert to the pragmatic mode of expression. If I had been asked, I could not have named what seems to me a better example of the intellectus sibi permittus than Dr Schiller’s Riddles of the Sphinx. In this attempt at approximation, however, I met with no encouragement. And in what is now written from the pragmatic point of view I feel more and more a steady drift to the overwhelming of all contemplation in the unexamined practical life of our day.

1 See The Metaphysics of Evolution, pp. 395, 397–8, 439.
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Among philosophers, I know as little where to look for a pure pragmatist as the pragmatists themselves profess to know where to look for "pure truth". From Prof. Muirhead’s recent work dealing with Idealism in the English-speaking world,¹ I have learnt with pleasure that C. S. Peirce, the acute and stimulating American thinker (as he appears to me from report) who suggested the name, strongly repudiated the position of later pragmatism, that "we live for the sake of action", and held an unfavourable opinion on the "voluntarist" psychology of Wundt as applied to ethics. Now the psychology of Wundt and his disciples is claimed, on the whole rightly, as an aid by the pragmatists; though Wundt himself was not a pragmatist, but evidently thought that in his System of Philosophy he had arrived at something of the nature of "pure truth". In this complication, I have renounced the attempt to educe a pragmatic system from any of the actual representatives of the doctrine, and have tried to "construct" the pure pragmatist from the idea of

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truth as “biological value”. A systematic hunt for the type might perhaps resemble, on a smaller scale, that of Plato for “the sophist”; but I merely state the results.

If we go some way down the biological scale we shall find no difficulty. We need not even leave the vertebrata and turn to those favourites of the deprecators of conscious reason and extollers of instinctive “behaviour”, the social insects. In a fine poem of Leconte de Lisle entitled Sacra Fames¹ the shark is represented as a kind of innocent monster—a monster only from our point of view—aiming simply at the preservation of organic life by his own mode of diet, and as completely clear of Hellenic addiction to the contemplative life as any pragmatist or dynamist or voluntarist or activist could desire.

Certes, il n’a souci de l’immensité bleue,
Des Trois Rois, du Triangle ou du long Scorpion
Qui tord dans l’infini sa flamboyante queue,
Ni de l’Ours qui plonge au clair Septentrion.

A less purely innocent, a more sophisticated stage, is reached by the Cyclops of Euripides.² His way of

¹ Poèmes Tragiques.
² Cyc. 316 ff.
life also includes the eating of human flesh, but now with consciousness. He translates biological values into generalised economic laws. His “world-view” is sufficiently expressed in the first two lines of Shelley’s translation:

Wealth, my good fellow, is the wise man’s God,
All other things are a pretence and boast.

The wealth of the Cyclops was of course in flocks and herds; but no doubt the poet had in view the more abstractly conceived aims of still more sophisticated contemporaries. For our own time of “increasing purpose” in all the “Main Streets” of the world, the pragmatist wise man’s position might be: Truth consists in the correlation of ideas useful to practical persons; the practical person being the person who can adapt himself with most efficiency to the modes of volitional activity, military or industrial or mixed, predominant in his own age.

The most recent development of the pragmatist theory of knowledge, in relation to its supposed scientific base, the voluntarist psychology, sometimes recalls to me Schopenhauer’s fanciful idea that
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“epicycles of error”, lasting about thirty years, present themselves from time to time as phases of fashionable philosophy under the illusion of “progress”.¹ I shall not attempt a theory of the causes of this appearance, which would require more detailed psychological study than I have given to the subject, but shall turn to the positive side and try to show that sound theory of knowledge, spontaneously detaching itself from subordination to factors of volition directed to practice, has been evolved by the intellect as a continuous thread running through the history of philosophy. Theoretical tests of truth do not remain to be created, but already exist; and, with the aid of progressive scientific theory, can be applied to the investigation of the nature of reality.²

¹ Schopenhauer’s metaphysical principle of “Will”, I must note, does not make him a psychological voluntarist. In philosophical theory of knowledge he is a thoroughgoing intellectualist; as might be expected from his dictum that the superior man is two-thirds intellect and one-third will, the inferior man two-thirds will and one-third intellect.

² The voluntarist psychology is not necessarily incompatible with the belief in theoretic truth, though doubtless it gives a bias towards Pragmatism. I have myself recognised a certain advance made by it in opposing the apparent tendency of English Associationism to forget, in subjective analysis, the fundamentally teleological character of the
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Quite consistently with this view, I am so far from denying the practical bearings of philosophic truth that, in my opinion, the whole future of humanity depends on direction by a true philosophy. But the possibility of attaining truth depends, I hold, on a certain disinterestedness. That is to say, philosophy must not take for postulates the purposes of those who govern or determine existing practice, but must make itself critical of practice in order to give it the right direction. The preparation for this direction, as Plato saw, is theoretical science in the widest sense. Now the type of mind from which this arises is one that, for voluntarist psychology as pragmatically applied, scarcely comes into view, perhaps even would be denied to exist.¹

organism. (*The Metaphysics of Evolution*, p. 369.) Bain, however, who was both psychologist and philosopher, pointed out, in an article “On Association-Controversies” (*Mind*, April, 1887, pp. 181–2), that in an analytic account of the human mind the linking of mental elements according to laws of association must always have a far larger part than the classification of motives to acts of attention.

¹ See Dr Schiller’s praise of Prof. McDougall (*Mind*, January, 1910, p. 110) for unreservedly proclaiming his adhesion to the pragmatic conception of science and truth, declaring that “all our intellectual apparatus and activities, the processes of perception, imagination, remembering, judgment, reasoning and so forth, are all alike, steps towards action, incidents, or events within a train of purposive activity
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Plato, on the other hand, recognised in the theoretic impulse a factor that existed even in the minds of early men. The Cratylus, no doubt, is in part a satire on the etymologisers of the time; but between jest and earnest Socrates puts forward serious thoughts about the origin of language; and one of these appears to be that those who first gave names to things were no ordinary people (οὐ ϕαύλοι), but were of the speculative tribe of subtle inquirers and reasoners; the kind of persons, in fact, who are sneered at by born pragmatists in all ages and nations as star-gazers and idle talkers.\(^1\) This we may interpret as meaning that for them mental activity was not purely and simply an instrument for the preservation of organic life or for its quantitative

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\(^1\) Cratylus, 401 b: κινδυνεύομεν γαῦν, ὡς ἂν Ερμόγενες, οἱ πρῶτοι τὰ ἀνόματα τιθέμενοι οὐ ϕαύλοι εἶναι ἄλλα μετεωρολόγοι καὶ ἀδολέχαται τινὲς. For the sneering signification compare Politicus, 299 c. In the Parmenides, the aged philosopher advises the youthful Socrates to disregard this: ἔλευσον δὲ σαυτὸν καὶ γύμνασον μᾶλλον διὰ τῆς δοκουσας ἰχρήστου εἶναι καὶ καλομενῆς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἀδολεσχίας, ἕως ἕτε νέος εἰ· εἰ δὲ μὴ, σὲ διαφεύγεται ἢ ἀλήθεια (135 d).
increase. Hobbes, two thousand years later, had the same thought when he described man as distinguished from other animals by the passions of admiration (i.e., wonder) and curiosity; from which, he said, have sprung not only the invention of names but all science dependent on the investigation of causes (or, in the language of his time, philosophy).

Even in cases where needs were assignable as the occasions on which sciences began, Aristotle (whom no one would class as an unpractical dreamer) ascribed their beginnings not to the practical need but to the opportunity of indulging theoretic curiosity. It was known that land-measurement was an end that the Egyptian geometers had to keep in view; but for Aristotle the fundamental reason explaining the rise of geometry in Egypt was not this, but the leisure enjoyed by the priestly caste. Whatever may be the truth here as regards the relation between external occasions and internal causes, we know that in Greece the passion for pure truth got

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1 The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic, ed. Tönnies, pp. 43–46. Cf. Plato, Theaetetus, 155 d, on wonder as the beginning of philosophy: μᾶλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τὸῦτο τὸ πάθος, τὸ θαυμάζειν' οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη ἀρχή φιλοσοφίας ἢ αὕτη.
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loose, and that the Egyptian and Babylonian begin-
nings of geometry and astronomy were carried on to the stage of theoretical science without further reference to practice.

In the modern time also, as we can learn directly from biography, scientific discoveries have not usually been made by those in whom what are commonly called practical motives are the most powerful. Faraday deliberately left his electro-magnetic discoveries to be applied by others; and, even in the case of invention directly for practice, the result depends far more on intellectual facility in combining ideas than on the quality of will in the inventor, who is as a rule notoriously weak in exploiting his inventions for his own advantage. The union of intellectual and of active powers in the same person has as much as anything the look of accident.

But for the present topic, which is the determi-
nation of origins, the ancient history is the most significant. As geometrical studies went on, there seemed to arise in the human mind a new power which cannot be described as volitional in any distinctive sense, but only as intellectual. Early