
Professor Pratt’s book is a most welcome and timely contribution to the discussion of pragmatism. It is an excellent summary of the current arguments against pragmatism, written in a very attractive style. The book fulfills the purpose stated by the author in his preface: “For though I have nowhere allowed the desire for simplicity and popularity to interfere with thoroughness of treatment, and though I have used technical language where exactness demands it, my aim has been throughout to give an exposition and critique of pragmatism which the general reader could follow without too much effort.” Both the general reader and the technical one will be well rewarded by giving the book a reading, not only because, whether he is in sympathy with the author’s standpoint or not, it will help to focus the discussion of the subject, but also because it has a spicy flavor of its own which makes the reading of it a pleasure.

The book is in the form of six lectures with the following titles: “Meaning and Method in Pragmatism,” “The Ambiguity of Truth,” “The Pragmatic View of the Truth Relation,” “Pragmatism and Knowledge,” “Pragmatism and Religion,” “The Practical Point of View.” In each lecture the author shows at what points pragmatism, to his mind, contains inadequacies or inner contradictions in dealing with the problem indicated by the title.

Professor Pratt selects three writers on pragmatism as spokesmen for the doctrine, Professor James, Professor Dewey and Dr. Schiller. He considers Professor Dewey’s formulation of the standpoint the most logical and consistent of the three—a view that, of course, for Professor Pratt, makes Professor Dewey’s pragmatism also the most reprehensible. It is obviously impossible within the limits of a book review to give an adequate summary of arguments, or refutation of them, even if one could! I shall content myself with pointing out where, on a few fundamental questions, Professor Pratt’s discussion seems to me to fail in being convincing.

In the first place, most of the serious difficulties with pragmatism which Professor Pratt encounters, seem to me to arise from a fundamental difference of opinion with regard to a problem which receives no explicit discussion in the book—the problem of reality. Professor Pratt’s excuse for not discussing it is that it is “as yet in so embryonic and unformed a condition that it would be premature and unfair for a non-pragmatist to try to state it” (p. 178). Although most of the problems which Professor Pratt discusses hinge upon one’s view of the relation of the idea to reality, he approaches them, nevertheless, with a preconceived conviction that reality, in order to be anything more than mere subjective experience, must have its existence independent of the thought which knows it. The contention of pragmatism is that we may regard reality as constructed in the knowledge process, and yet may distinguish it sharply from the mere subjective experience which is the instrument of
its construction. Professor Pratt is willing to admit that an existence postulated as independent of the knowledge process can never itself get into knowledge, but he insists that the only way we can keep from “lifting ourselves by our boot straps” is at least to mean such a reality—a proceeding in which he can see no difficulties but manufactured ones. I do not feel that I should be any more flippant than Professor Pratt is at times if I should forthwith accuse him of being, after all, a pragmatist in his fundamental assumption, for his only justification for assuming a reality whose existence is independent of the thought which knows it, is the pragmatic one that he can not see how to make his universe work without it.

The deadlock between Professor Pratt and the pragmatists on the subject of truth is only another manifestation of their opposed views of reality. For Professor Pratt, of course, truth is correspondence between an idea and an already existing reality. The difficulties with this view of truth which the pragmatist points out do not seem to him genuine. He is quite undaunted by the impossibility of ever testing that kind of correspondence. To him there is no insuperable difficulty in holding that the “trueness” of an idea lies in its correspondence with an already existing reality, while the test of its truth is the consequences to which it leads. He accuses the pragmatist of committing a logical error when he identifies the trueness of an idea with the process which tests it. But surely it is within the logical possibilities that the trueness of an idea should be constituted by its successful functioning, or that, in Professor Pratt’s words, its “trueness” and its “truth” should coincide. The view seems illogical only to one who is already committed to the conviction that trueness must exist before it can be tested. Nor is it a damning admission to the pragmatist to agree that a given content of thought may be truth under one set of circumstances and falsehood under another, because for him truth is never inherent in the content of an idea, but always in its function. One is tempted to feel that Professor Pratt’s refutation of the pragmatic view of truth consists in showing that the conclusions to be drawn from it are not in accord with a metaphysics which pragmatism expressly repudiates.

In dealing with the problems of meaning and method, Professor Pratt seems to me to have failed to interpret pragmatism correctly in two respects. When he makes the statement that “the distinction between a red house and a green house does not consist in a difference of practise” (p. 18), he is implying that the ultimate qualities of sensation are parts of meaning, a view which is certainly not that of the pragmatist. The sensory qualities he accepts as the ultimate given content of experience behind which we can not go. In and of themselves, redness and greenness have no meaning. It is only as they serve to guide action that they acquire it. There is no absurdity in the statement that the difference in meaning between a red house and a green one does, as a matter of fact, go back to a difference in practise.

Secondly, Professor Pratt’s failure to find the pragmatic view of meaning as inherent in anticipated consequences satisfactory, is due, at
least in part, to a failure to follow the pragmatic method to the extent of selecting a total concrete situation from actual experience as a basis for reasoning. An enlightening distinction may be made between “dead” and “live” judgments. A dead judgment is the mere statement of the outcome of some completed process of thought. One can not draw reliable conclusions about the thought process from these shells which are left behind after the animal is dead and gone. The judgment must be resuscitated in imagination, and regarded as it was when it was made. The illustration taken from Professor James of the meaning attaching to ideas at the last moment of existence is for this reason an unfortunate one. But if Professor Pratt would sit down and really try to imagine with the utmost vividness possible what his state of consciousness would be if he were knowingly facing the last moment of existence, I think he would be almost willing to admit that the meaning would have evaporated from all ideas, except in so far as he could forget the state of affairs sufficiently to adopt the habitual attitude of future reference. No man under those circumstances would be reflecting on the problem as to whether Mr. James or Mr. Bradley wrote “Pragmatism.” Professor Pratt constructs a situation which is impossible, and then argues most improbably about what would happen if it were true. Moreover, if he were really putting himself for the moment into the pragmatist’s shoes, he would not talk about the past consequences of an idea. The pragmatist insists that one must take the idea at the moment of its existence, and in its actual setting, in order to judge wherein its meaning lies. At the moment of its existence, an idea has no past consequences, it can have only anticipations of future ones—anticipations derived, to be sure, from past experience, but whose present importance is that of a guide in dealing with the situation at hand.

Finally, bearing in mind the criticism just made, I can not see why the pragmatist should object to as broad an interpretation of his doctrine as Professor Pratt wishes. The pragmatist does not contend that his theory of meaning is entirely new in the history of thought, but merely that it has never before been consistently elaborated. Professor Pratt is quite right in saying that one can find passages in Mr. Bradley’s writings which state it excellently. The point the pragmatist makes is that a philosophy which regards reality as independent (in its existence at least) of thought, as Mr. Bradley does, can not consistently hold the view that meaning is inherent in consequences. Just as truth from such a standpoint must consist in correspondence with “reality,” so meaning must logically be regarded as reference to “reality”—a concept quite distinct from that of meaning as constituted by consequences. The pragmatist’s quarrel with Mr. Bradley is that he finds both concepts of meaning unreconciled and, as he believes, unreconcilable, in Mr. Bradley’s writings. The problem of meaning, like that of truth, brings us back to the opposed views of the metaphysics of reality, and on this ground, it seems to me, the battle must be fought out.

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