

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE AS IF.

BY THE EDITOR.

A WORK bearing the above title has recently appeared in Germany.¹ It was originally prepared in the years 1875-1878, but the author considers that the present is a much more appropriate time for its appearance, and thinks the world is more ready to receive it than would have been the case a generation ago. As causes which have prepared the way for its appreciation the preface enumerates the voluntarism of Wundt, the biological epistemology of Mach and Avenarius, the philosophy of Nietzsche, and pragmatism, especially the original pragmatism of Peirce. Strangely enough the author's name is not mentioned, but the work has been carefully edited and prepared by Dr. H. Vaihinger, of Halle, the editor of *Kantstudien*, a philosophical periodical dedicated to Kant and Kantian literature. Here is set forth a species of pragmatism which is a decided improvement on the current pragmatism with its new though very hazy conception of truth, and the proposition that certain statements of truth are not exact but are to be understood allegorically is mainly true of religion. It is the more interesting to find this development of modern thought because its publication has been anticipated by the editor of *The Monist*, who used the very same term "as if" in discussions of the soul, of God, and of things, and of concrete units in mathematics as well as in the real world. The passages on this subject may be found in an article on "The Soul in Science and Religion" with special reference to Fechner. See *The Monist*, April, 1906, page 252, where Fechner's soul-conception is given thus: "His view though untenable in its literal meaning, is *as if true*; it incorporates a truth that is significant and that should not be denied." (The italics are in the original text.)

In the same way numbers are not real things. They are fic-

¹ *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*. Berlin, Reuther & Reichard, 1911.

titious units and in applying them to real life we can use them and they serve their purpose *as if* they were true units. The idea of a unit is a fiction. Units act as if they were real.² The same is true of God. God is not an individual being, a ruler of the world, but when the prophets speak of him in this humanized conception the idea of God as a human personality is *as if* it were true, an idea fully brought out in the writer's book, *God, an Inquiry and a Solution*.³

The same is true of Kant's idea of things-in-themselves. All things are fleeting combinations not to be separated from their surroundings of which they form parts, but when treating things as if they were things-in-themselves this idea is for certain purposes as if it were true. The author of the present work has made of this idea of the *as if* a whole system of philosophy, and places on the title page a motto by F. A. Lange, who says "I am convinced that the point urged here shall become a corner-stone of philosophical epistemology," but in this contention we fear our author goes too far. We grant, as urged in the book *The Surd of Metaphysics* (An Inquiry into the Nature of Things-in-Themselves) that even science has its mythology, or in other words that certain events in nature are first comprehended by analogies which are only imperfectly correct. We speak of electric *currents* as if electricity were a fluid which runs along like a river, whereas in truth it is the transmission of waves while the particles moved remain in place; and there are many other analogies in science which are not quite so, but they are *as if* they were so, and for the time being the allegory is sufficient to form ideas which in a limited way are correct and can serve as guides for certain practical purposes. For that reason, however, we must always bear in mind that all comprehension through analogy by statements representing half-known processes under the fiction *as if* they were like other processes better known to us, is not an ultimate, and science must not halt before the philosophy of the "as if." Important though the idea is, it should not be regarded as the corner-stone of cognition.

The book before us is anonymous; it is edited by Professor Vaihinger; but we may be pardoned when we state that the editor appears to be the author himself. Having written the book years ago, it has become to him the work of another, of his former self, and having changed his modes of thought, he felt that either he

² See Carus, *The Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 79.

³ Chicago, Open Court Publishing Company, 1908.

had to let the book stand as written or he should rewrite it all. He preferred the former course and acted as the editor of the lucubrations of his younger years.

Dr. Vaihinger's book contains many interesting chapters, and considering its enormous bulk it may be desirable to publish an outline of the main ideas.

The first chapter is a general introduction and conceives thought as being viewed from the view-point of a teleological organic function. It is an art, and thus the author considers logic as the doctrine of an art, which however should not be confused with artifices. Here he sees the foundation of the nature of fictions of thought. The first part is the foundation of the author's principle. He distinguishes between abstract or negative fictions, schematic, paradigmatic, utopic and typic fictions, symbolic fictions (fictions by analogy) juridical fictions, personific fictions, summatory fictions, heuristic fictions, practical and ethical fictions, mathematical fictions, methods of abstract generalization, the concepts of the infinite, matter and the world of sense, the atom as a fiction, fictions of mechanics and mathematical fictions, and the Absolute.

After these preparations he propounds his logical theory of scientific fictions (pages 123 to 230). He points out the difference between fiction and hypothesis, and analyses his idea of the "as if."

In Chapter XXIII our author collects a number of synonyms for the word "fiction" which characterize the "as if." On page 169 he speaks of *Erdichtungen*, *Einbildungen*, *Hirngespinnste*, *Phantasien*, *phantastische Begriffe*, *Imagination*, *imaginäre Begriffe*. He discusses the characteristics of fictions and proposes a general theory of fictitious conceptions. Further he enters into the methods of correcting arbitrary differences by making opposite mistakes. In Chapter XXVII he formulates a law of transition of ideas and their development from hypothesis to dogma, from dogma to fiction, and other transformations in the process of thinking. In discussing the history of fictions he devotes a chapter to fictions in the scientific practice of ancient Greece and Rome, which leads him to the significance of the terminology of the Middle Ages and the application of fiction in modern times. In referring to epistemological conclusions he devotes a chapter to the epistemological problems by saying that thought falsifies reality through deductions and additions. The problem originates that while we deal with thought in a falsified reality, thought after all agrees with reality. Dogmatism which identifies the falsified nature of thought with existence itself is

logical optimism. Skepticism however is logical pessimism. The solution of the difficulty lies in the establishment of a logical criticism. The categories are fictions but there is a good purpose in these categoric fictions.

The second part (pages 328 to 612) points out that the use of natural classification is not always sufficient and must be supplanted by artificial classification. The author finds examples in Adam Smith's and Bentham's methods of national economy and also in the methods of physics and psychics. Steinthal's idea of a speechless man (*homo alalus*) is used as an instance of how the fiction develops into an hypothesis. Other instances are the fictions of energy; the fictions of matter and materialism and all other abstract conceptions; the fiction of atomism and of mathematical physics; the fiction of absolute space, of the notions of the plane, the line, the point, of the infinitesimal; the fictitious judgment, and fiction in contrast to hypothesis.

The third part is devoted to historical investigations, in which Kant takes the lead and is followed by an appreciation of the views of Forberg, F. A. Lange and Nietzsche.