

A PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE.

BY SIDNEY HOOK.

PRAGMATICUS:

Good morning, Universalus, I have been impatiently awaiting your arrival. We left our discussion suspended in mid-air yesterday and I am being consumed with eagerness to unburden myself of some additional thoughts which have crowded in during the interim.

UNIVERSALUS:

Pray, proceed, my dear Pragmaticus, I find your impetuous attacks upon my philosophic attitude delightfully stimulating even tho they do not carry conviction.

PRAGMATICUS:

We had agreed in our previous discussion that moral and social influences were instrumental in determining what systems of apparently pure thought were to be identified with or converted into social apologetics. The fact that some of these grandiose systems were not so immaculately free from contact with ordinary affairs has suggested grave doubts in my mind concerning the utility of abstruse philosophical thinking in general. The trend of the times indicates that the mental energy frittered away in attempting to discover the elusive "eternal verities" or in inventing fictitious, if not altogether mythical, cosmologies, brings no countervailing returns. Hence, I am constrained to deny that philosophy has any other task than to serve as the handmaiden of social thought.

UNIVERSALUS:

That is a rather startling conclusion and I am at a loss to ascertain how it follows from your premises.

PRAGMATICUS:

I have just been reflecting on the historic problems of philosophy and on the attitude which the resolute school of pragmatist thinkers have adopted towards them. I am in complete accord with their admirable analysis and summary of what the Freudians would be inclined to call the "repressed complexes" of the great idealistic systems of the past. I maintain with them that the superiority of the contemplative to the practical knowledge in the transcendentalists arose from a desire to express in their conception of perfect Ideality, the opposite of those things which rendered life so harrowingly tragical and so insufferably meaningless. These tendencies in their thought can be traced to an aesthetic isolation from the capricious and disconcerting flux of life. Philosophers have fled to a *tour d'ivorie* to spin intricate cobwebs and dreams of gossamer which must be brushed from the sleep-laden eyes of men if they are not to go astray in the maze of their own perplexity.

UNIVERSALUS:

The colors in which you paint the picture, my dear Pragmaticus, are too sombre and forbidding. I grant that the net result of technical philosophical thought has been as negligible as you say, but nevertheless, a misdirected bent does not imply misdirected motive. Neither have you considered the importance of philosophical thought as an aspect of irrepressible, intellectual play. No, no, you have not shown cause why thinkers should leave their temples on the heights to descend amidst man and his lowly cares.

PRAGMATICUS:

I have not finished. Such philosophies as I have described have necessarily been static, worshipping things as they are, lacking any fundamental conception of change. Their subject matter has been pure Being—that can be cognized in scarecrow form only after being negated by or identified with Non-being. In such muddy rather than deep waters have philosophers cast their lines.

UNIVERSALUS:

Not so fast my friend. What I say in exception to your *ex cathedra* utterances may not vitiate your conclusion but

for the sake of historical accuracy I wish to point out that what you and the entire pragmatic school in the person of Prof. Dewey denominate as abstract staticism did not exist as completely as they would have us believe. As little as I agree, from my neo-realistic standpoint, with their doctrine of internal relations, I nevertheless, to do them justice, cannot but point out that the fundamental idealistic conception in the philosophy of Leibnitz or Hegel permitted of some development and gradation. That this development and gradation were simply an evolution of the given, that this coming and going viewed alone were incomplete and in a sense "unreal", does not affect the reality of the change when interpreted as a gradual assertion of the ideal embodied in repressive matter. In every system the ideal is either made synonymous with or the determining limit of the real. In fact, I cannot decide which is the greater error; to accept as you do all change as reality, or to call all change partial reality. This is one of the many points of contact between pragmatism and orthodox Hegelianism and makes more pointed the casual observation of a learned scholar that "the pragmatists have not been the only ones to curse their mother".

PRAGMATICUS:

I will not argue the question for I desire to impress upon you the notion that philosophy must cease being dialectical and become experimental. Its justification should consist in its ability to induce genuine and beneficial change. It must as Dewey says "cease being contemplative and become in a true sense practical". Philosophy would then be squarely confronted with the great moral and social problems of the day. Its subject matter would be the specific situation. Its solutions would be definite, applicable to the world around us; it would rationalize the possibilities of human experience. Philosophy would worship at the shrine of humanity not at the sepulchre of disembodied thought. What think you?

UNIVERSALUS:

This outburst of moral enthusiasm is highly creditable, Pragmaticus, but you have not made explicit all the implications of your position. First of all you state with a glibness born of a desire to believe it so, that all idealistic systems have

merely represented an attempt to work over a hostile world into more congenial colors and have never sullied their purity by dabbling in the mire of social facts. And yet the pragmatists never tire of pointing to the Hegelian philosophy as the ideological prop of the Prussian bureaucracy, as counsel for the defence of the Prussian State. I mention this to call your attention to the fact that almost every philosophy has treated more or less cursorily of the problems of contemporary society while delving into deeper questions of existence and knowledge. Were philosophy to readjust itself to your eloquent plea that it devote its energies primarily to the solution of pressing social and moral problems, then philosophy would no longer be philosophy but a phase of social science. I would in addition ask you whether you have strictly delimited yourself when you speak of philosophy being operative or practical? To respond, as others have done, by saying that the connotation of "practical" includes all forms of human activity indicates a mindful and hopeless inconsistency or an unavailing dodge, for then the very philosophizing which you so vehemently descry, appears as an irrepressible activity of the human mind, and therefore, practical.

PRAGMATICUS:

I had thought that I had threshed this matter out with you and made it understood that by practical and practical goods I do not mean merely that which ministers to the body but that also which causes the spirit to flower—that which breathes upon the spark of divinity causing it to light up and illumine the hidden recesses of our mind and the dark places of the earth.

UNIVERSALUS:

Ah! my dear Pragmaticus, even Aristippus, the Cyrenean, placed the pleasures which attended the use of his physical and intellectual faculties on the same plane. He did not truly distinguish between them. But tell me, pray, what affairs of the spirit would your philosopher ponder over when war and classes and capitalism have all been abolished? When the crying social evils stalking thru the world have been laid low? *What you call spiritual today is a transparent disguise for what you deem just!* But after justice? What then? Do you begin

to understand? "What care I", cries the philosopher who is not an incurable optimist, "whether humanity labors in travail or lolls in ease, whether humanity prospers and multiplies or ignominiously perishes, unless I can discover some vestiges of meaning in the maelstrom of existence, unless I can discern unity of plan or purposes in this unordered, incomprehensible, essentially mystic, universe"? What significance does activity hold for me if the earth can be resolved to be only a fortuitous concourse of atoms? Are you already aware of the relation subsisting between consciousness and the Cosmos, between value and existence that you seek to pour a bounding, erratic reality into arbitrary moulds? When you, Pragmaticus, saying half in jest and half in earnest that you are not so finely grained, classify man on the basis of his origin, differing from the rest of animaldom solely thru a superior adjustment or reaction to tangibilities in a grossly material environment, we refuse to lower our brows in acceptance of the unwarranted inference that the past must determine the sum total of our future activity. You must permit us to traverse our weary way detached from the meaningless immediacies of your life.

PRAGMATICUS:

Ah, friend, yours is a futile and thankless task. To your questions there are no answering. Just like Andrayev's "Anathema" you crawl upon your belly to the outermost limits of reason only to be crazed by the torturing silence of the impenetrable and the unfathomable. Are you not deterred by the very uncertainty of your quest and the barrenness of achievement?

UNIVERSALUS:

True philosophy *is* uncertain. It does not seek exact knowledge yet in its pursuit of the "magic stone" it gave to a work-ridden world astronomy, mathematics and more recently psychology. "The value of philosophy is, in fact", says Bertrand Russell, "to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. . . . while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are; it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled in the region of liberating doubt. and in a life where there is no peace but a constant strife be-

tween the insistence of desire and the powerlessness of will, it enables us, if our life is to be great and free to escape this prison and this strife”.

PRAGMATICUS:

And is there no place for a suffering humanity in these beautiful and yet demoniacal aspirations of yours?

UNIVERSALUS:

Do not believe, Oh dear Pragmaticus, that we are unmoved by the call of our flesh. We cannot but relegate these things, however, to their proper place in our scale of values. Perhaps it is true that philosophers have not concerned themselves overmuch with practical affairs. But will matters be remedied if the priests of the sacred flame are driven from their high places into the maelstrom and mob? Have the pseudo-philosophers of the market place, amidst the din and pandemonium, shed any but a lurid propagandist light on the moot questions of the day? Your end would be better served, Pragmaticus, by leaving the philosophers to their own purposes. Yet do not forget, that when you are smugly complacent in a well ordered world, the poignancy of the mental struggle for the solution of problems still unanswerable, will remain with us. And tho our efforts go uncrowned with success and we be ever fitfully chasing the joy of discovery—a cup to be sought for but never to be tasted—we will seek personal fulfillment singing with Swinburne over our thoughts, comparing them with

“Leaves, pale and sombre and ruddy
Dead fruits of the fugitive years
Some stained as with wine and made
Bloody and some as with tears”.

PRAGMATICUS:

Well, Universalus, if we cannot reconcile our temperamental differences at least we can heed the tolling of the dinner bell and sit down to a light repast, requitting ourselves with talk for the foaming nectar which unkind powers have dashed from our lips, with their meddlesome amendments.