

METAPHYSICS REVIVED

PURE philosophy is no longer unfashionable. In the last few years, scientists of repute have impressed the general reader with its capital importance. The brilliant expositions of contemporary science by Sir A. S. Eddington and Sir James Jeans mount to a philosophical enquiry. They make it quite clear that physical science as such cannot arrive at the nature of things.

The Cambridge University Press has now given us an account, in a small volume¹ the size of *The Mysterious Universe*, of a voyage into metaphysics launched in the true spirit of Plato, St. Thomas, Spinoza and the pure philosophers of the past. It does not set out to discover and provide a popular map of reality. But when philosophy has been too often confused with so much that is inferior, it is agreeable to read of 'a resolute direction of thought to the problem of Being'; of an effort to attain truth through Ideas and not images; of a search for causes that are at the same time reasons.

I

Mr. Whittaker begins by enquiring: *Is there Theoretic Truth?* He discovers '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.'

Pragmatism holds that knowledge is an affair essentially directed to practical ends, and that truth is simply a kind of 'biological value,' found useful or

¹ PROLEGOMENA TO A NEW METAPHYSIC. By Thomas Whittaker. (Cambridge University Press; 1931. Pp. 120. 5/-)

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necessary for the business of living and adopted so long as it works. The air and manner is cultivated and humane, but really it is all of a piece with those little books which tell you how to treble your income. Truth is judged by the Gospel of Success.

But while in practice many are pragmatists just as they are atheists, a pure pragmatist is difficult to find. His theory at least must aspire to some sort of speculative value. No truth worthy of the name is regarded as a mere utility. It can always awaken the disinterested passion of admiration and curiosity, by which we distinguished from the other animals.

Renouncing the attempt to educe a thorough-going pragmatic system from the representatives of the doctrine, Mr. Whittaker tries to construct the pure pragmatist from the idea of truth as 'biological value.' 'A systematic hunt for the type might perhaps resemble, on a smaller scale, that of Plato for "the sophist."' While not concerned to deny the relevance of pure truth to action, experience and success, he observes that 'biological value' can be considered as the test only of survival, and that no jugglery with words can make survival signify truth. 'Truth is not truth because it prevails; though it may be true that it will prevail in the long run.'

The popular antithesis between 'theory' and 'practice' is scarcely tolerable to considered thought. Here true practice appears as more than a matter of work-a-day convenience, but directed to an eventual contemplation which, far from being rarified and remote, constitutes the fullness of life and action. Dr. Schiller has resolved the antithesis by declaring that if we take 'practical' widely enough, as meaning 'concerned with the business of living,' not only does its antithesis to 'theoretic' become relative, but all our thoughts and acts must be 'practical.' Such a pragmatism, of course, should not offend the intel-

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lectualist, particularly if the business of living is not restricted to its organic functions, but extended to include the highest form of life, the movement of mind. St. Thomas's intellectualism and Dr. Schiller's humanism are not sharply opposed systems of thought.

According to one fable, Thales, the first of the philosophers, fell into a well; according to another, he made a 'corner' in oil. The opposition between thought and action even lacks historical support, though the philosopher, like the mother-in-law, is the subject of popular joke—boiling his watch with an egg in his hand. But if inclined to be absent-minded, the greatest thinkers have not been unpractical dreamers, least of all the Greeks, who first manifested the passion for pure truth apart from its immediately practical applications.

The antithesis between theory and practice, which is represented in religious literature by the dichotomy of the contemplative and active lives, is seen to be more facile than true when the terms are examined. Mr. Whittaker is convinced that the controversy between the principles of Reason and Experience has arrived at an approximate solution, but he does not hold himself excused from insisting that truth is disinterested and its own justification, and that the theoretic impulse is not simply an instrument for the preservation of life or its quantitative increase. He refuses to be rattled by the journalese philosophy of the so-called 'practical man,' and imperturbably pursues the notion of truth proclaimed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. 'I am afraid that, if pragmatism wants a Platonic forerunner, it will have to fall back on Dionysodoros, the less intelligent of the two brothers in the *Euthydemus*.'

It is unfortunate that pure theory should have come to suggest an ineffective highbrow, rather bald and stooping, and mothered by a managing wife. 'Prac-

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tricia, my dear, may I have another cup of tea?' 'No, dear, you know that it is bad for you, I will fill up your cup with milk and some nice hot water instead.' It is possibly the fault of the professors. But in reality, theory should direct and govern practice. It is no criticism of Distributism, for instance, that it cannot be accommodated to the present industrial system; that, as is so often said, it is 'unpractical.' For theory must precede practice. Practice divorced from theory is merely automatism empty of sense. Distributism is first of all a theory, and rightly so, if nothing more for the moment. But it is ideas that shape the course of events. *Des Idées Napoléoniennes* was pure theory in 1839. And at any rate a philosophy that aims merely at the expression and defence of existing practice is a tame-spirited and very Louis-Philippe sort of affair.

II.

After vindicating the value of pure thought, Mr. Whittaker then turns to open up its content. In a second section he enquires, *Has Ontology Failed?* Like the churchmen faced by a similar question, he suggests that it has scarcely been tried indeed. Since the sixteenth century ontology has suffered from the preoccupation with the problem of knowledge. Spinoza is an exception, a true metaphysician who aimed at grasping the Whole.

In our prevailing philosophical agnosticism, he appeals to what Socrates says in the *Meno*, that we shall be better in every way for not assuming that that which no one knows cannot be found out. As a method of advance, he advocates a return to the formative stages of past thought and vision.

There is a general condition present in all the processes of conscious life. It is the pursuit of ends re-

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garded as goods. No one 'kind' of thing can be regarded as the good for all. Nevertheless, purpose runs through all and brings them under the sway of the Idea of the Good. Mr. Whittaker had already arrived at the conclusion, in *The Metaphysics of Evolution* (1926), that scientific evolution requires the restoration of teleology. Here, then, where metaphysical and scientific theory meet, is promised a fruitful ground for enquiry.

This is developed in the third section : *Renewal of the Search for Reality*. Although the distinction is maintained between philosophy on the one side and mathematics and physics on the other, there is a certain oscillation between the two which rather interferes with the metaphysical note. This may be accounted for by the fact that the author is designedly taking up the problem where it is left by the scientists and trying to fit their questions into a philosophical framework. There is no actual confusion of the two orders of philosophical and scientific theory; importance is not measured by size, and causation is not taken as the equivalent of mechanical determinism. Left over from the last century is an impression that causation is somehow opposed to teleology. Mr. Whittaker rightly fails to see any antithesis between what, for a Thomist, are correlatives, even if causation is taken in a scientifically determinist sense.

The philosophical position which is arrived at seems, briefly, to be an Idealism after the manner of Plato and Berkeley, supported by the cosmology of Jeans. The validity of certain elementary *a priori* principles of thought is accepted. ('When Aristotle had done his work, it could be said that, through the investigation of the concept, resolutely taken in hand by Socrates, and carried forward to new issues by Plato, the Hellenic mind had passed on to a phase in which canons of thinking were established that were irrefragable

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within their limits.')

These cannot be considered as simply derived from an accumulation of experiences.

Declining a purely metaphysical principle to start with, Mr. Whittaker postulates: 'that the number of all singly numerable things and events, present and past, is finite.' This proposition is confirmed by recent advances in astronomical science, is conformable to the findings of Professors Whitehead and Einstein, and points back to a temporal beginning of the whole aggregate of stellar systems.

Developing this notion, he observes that Jeans and Eddington trace the beginning of things to thought. For if we attempt to reach forward to a view of the Whole, we realize the inadequacy of physical science and the need of a philosophy of mind. This is the place of pure intelligence, expressed rather after the analogy of ordered mathematical thought than of a vague diffused sentiency. As Jeans has argued, nature could not be so successfully expressed mathematically if this were not the case. But even behind mathematics lies a philosophy of thought, a theory of knowledge.

Spinoza is quoted to the effect that if the analogy of the human mind is permissible, then the intellect of the Whole must proceed in exactly the opposite way to that which we know in our own mental history as individuals; that is to say, it must proceed not from the things of experience to thought, but from thought to things. St. Thomas could easily be quoted for similar support, that First Thought is the cause of things.

At the background, then, of things is thought; a pre-mundane Thought in which alone is prefigured the possibility, necessity, and unity of the universe, even if, as Mr. Whittaker acutely notices, it is considered to be in total evolution. Further, this Principle of the Whole must be absolute and infinite, one and eternal. The author will not commit himself to

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personality and the possession of will, yet he agrees with Bradley that it is better to view this ultimate metaphysical principle as comparable to personal mind rather than to something we know only as sub-personal.

From this height, he essays a descent to the problem of the Many, without, however, attempting to deduce the Many from the One. Here, again, he seizes the significance of 'final causes' in the life of organisms. Teleology, the true nature of which cannot be properly expressed in mathematico-physical or physico-chemical terms, implies the individual, a self-determining centre of activity.

We are reaching a metaphysical pluralism. Individuality lies deeper than the world of physics. The psychical individual, the unitary consciousness, cannot be explained by physical elements, or considered as derived from electrons. In fact, Mr. Whittaker is so impressed by the apparent impossibility of deriving the individual from anything outside itself, that he invests it with such depth of being as to countenance Schopenhauer's imperfectly worked-out theory of 'the *aseitas* of the individual.' There is a certain likeness here to the monadism of Leibniz.

The enquiry is conducted throughout in an admirable philosophical spirit, calm, detached, learned, with a disarming diffidence and gentle humour. The criticism is keen but temperate. For instance, that 'in the Middle Ages so many essentially empirical assertions were taken for granted without reference to the appropriate test of experience—insufficiently elaborated in the Aristotelian logic, far as Aristotle himself was from ignoring experience—that all the care taken over correctness of reasoning seemed to lead only to empty logomachy.' This is both just, and witnesses to the fact that an emphasis on the absolute value of pure truth need not dispense from care for experience.

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‘ That, of all philosophers, the pessimists have put forth what are most unmistakably theodicies ’ is a typically shrewd observation. Interpretations are sympathetic, subtle, suggestive. For example, that the ‘ objective ’ spirit of Greek philosophy was not a sort of gaze fixed on a stage occupied by quasi-geometrical forms.

St. Thomas’s name is never mentioned, and there are only a few passing references to Scholasticism. But in this treatise which defends Contemplation, Purpose and Personality—the value of truth for its own sake, the existence of final causality and the metaphysical rights of the individual—a Thomist will recognize and appreciate a congenial temper and philosophy; a prolegomena to what he considers the perennial metaphysic of our civilization.

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