Some Religious Implications of Pragmatism

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SOME RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF PRAGMATISM

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Two things there are, said Kant, which are worthy of man's reverence, "the starry heavens above and the moral law within." This outburst of scientific enthusiasm and moral fervor may be fairly said to epitomize the spirit and the motif of modern philosophy. Whenever and wherever our modern life has presented its problems or vouchsafed its satisfactions one or the other, or both, of these interests have been implicated. And philosophic thought has taken its cues accordingly. Not every thinker has been as catholic in his interests as was Kant. To some the "starry heavens above" have seemed all-important, while to others the "moral law within" has made the strongest appeal. But few thinkers, no matter how great their bias in one direction, have been insensible to the problems lying in the other direction. And the profoundest systems of philosophy have come from those men who, like Kant, have been concerned with both the natural and the spiritual, the real and the ideal, the "is" and the "ought," have felt these to be incompatible and have sought to penetrate to some deeper principle of unity.

This more fundamental principle of unity, however, has not been forthcoming. Spinoza's "God or Nature," Kant's "Thing in Itself," Hegel's "Absolute," and Spencer's "Unknownable"—all are but grim testimonies of the persistence of the problem. It is as urgent today as it was in an earlier and more metaphysical age. To be sure, we have become suspicious of the possibility or the worth of "ultimate" principles and impatient with any philosophy which attempts to formulate such principles. With the development of scientific methods, our practical problems have so multiplied and our immediate experience has become so engaging as to leave us little time or inclination for the consideration of problems of a more strictly philosophic character. Furthermore, as knowledge has become more and more specialized, a sort of division of labor has served to isolate the various fields of human interests and activities, and to obscure the fact of their connections. But, while this specialization of knowledge has its advantages, it likewise has its dangers. The quality of the work done by the particular sciences is apt to be impaired by too rigid an isolation of their respective fields. Life itself is not made up of clearly marked off fields of interest and activities.
Its areas overlap. Of course, it is profitable for certain purposes and within certain limits to treat some particular group of phenomena without regard to the relation of these to other phenomena. But the reason for this relative isolation of various groups of phenomena are precisely those which look toward the enrichment of life and toward establishing and maintaining its organic character. To the extent that specialization furthers these ends it is legitimate. But there is no practical or scientific virtue in mere specialization of knowledge and isolation of the sciences, as such. The very considerations which demand a division of labor among the sciences likewise demand a more general science or discipline whose task it is to serve as a sort of clearing house for the adjustment of conflicts arising out of such an artificial way of conceiving life. “Every science,” says Professor Dewey, “in its final standpoint and working aims is controlled by conditions lying outside of itself—conditions which subsist in the practical life of the time.” But the conditions with reference to which the standpoint and working aims of a given science are to be determined must themselves be criticized and evaluated from the point of view of other and broader areas of experience. Such a criticism and evaluation can be accomplished only by the sort of discipline indicated above. This discipline, to be sure, cannot be a science of “first principles” in any ultimate or metaphysical sense. It will not have access to realms of reality inaccessible to the particular sciences. It must rely on the general method of procedure employed by the particular sciences. That is to say, it must proceed by means of hypothesis and experimentation. But it will construct hypotheses which are relevant to its own data and problems and execute its experiments accordingly.

And thus, in spite of the fact that the aims and the methods of modern science would seem to leave no place for a philosophic discipline—indeed, because of this very fact, the demand for just such a discipline is the most persistent and most vital scientific problem of our day. In the words of a contemporary writer, “the demand (for a synthesis of experience) remains, and with every new discovery of science, every advance in the ideals of art and of the conduct of life, every development in religious faiths, comes anew the task of philosophy—to criticize and through criticism, to make a fresh attempt to interpret, from the unity of reason, the manifold of life.”

Now, the most notable instance, perhaps, of the need of this type of philosophic criticism and interpretation is in connection with the "conflict" between theology and the natural sciences. Facts could be cited to show that our modern life has suffered immeasurably by reason of the ambiguity and confusion growing out of this "conflict." The natural sciences and theology do not, as is commonly held, occupy independent and isolated spheres. The areas of experience with which they are concerned overlap. They have common interests. The relative and abstract concepts with which they severally operate are not adequate to serve as "cosmic principles," or even to provide the foundations of "independent" systems of knowledge. Both theology and the sciences are confronted with problems for the solution of which they must look beyond their own immediate data. This means that for the purposes of these problems the categories which they respectively employ need themselves to be made the objects of scientific scrutiny—to be criticized and interpreted from the point of view of other areas of experience. But there has been too little of this sort of thing. On the one hand, theology, relying upon a supernatural revelation or upon an equally supernatural reason, has dogmatically asserted its self-sufficiency and has persistently ignored the facts of science. On the other hand, science, having paid so dearly for its emancipation from theological prejudice, has come to doubt that "any good thing can come out of Nazareth." It has usually explained religious phenomena by explaining them away. It has measured the truth of religious ideas by showing that these ideas cannot be true.

Now this dilemma of a theology which is not scientific enough and a science with little or no appreciation of the religious point of view is a constant challenge to any way of thinking which presumes to effect by criticism and interpretation a greater unity within the several areas of experience. This study is undertaken from the point of view of the urgency of this challenge. It is concerned with the religious problem as it has come to be formulated in the history of modern thought. It is proposed to examine this problem in the light of its historical background, and more particularly, to determine what implications there are for an adequate treatment of it from the point of view of the current philosophic movement known as "pragmatism."
CHAPTER II

THE RELIGIOUS PROBLEM IN ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

The religious problem as it has persisted in modern philosophy is but a part of the more general problem of epistemology. The epistemological point of view is the philosophic articulation of the difficulties incident to the breakdown of the doctrine of supernatural revelation. These difficulties were at first essentially theological. Mediaeval theology was the foundation of the entire social and political superstructure comprising the secular world of the Middle Ages. It acquired the prestige and power essential to such a position through its doctrines of supernatural revelation and divine authority. And the historical reasons for the development of these doctrines are obvious. In the first place, the Church was the source of all learning and culture throughout the "Dark Ages." It was the school wherein the western races, but lately emerged from barbarism, learned the lessons of self-control and self-direction. To meet the demands made upon it, the Church needed to be sure of itself; it must speak in no uncertain terms; its utterances must be authoritative. To this end it assimilated the doctrines of Hebrew religion, the ideas of Greek philosophy and art, and the principles of Roman law, formulated these into an elaborate system of dogmas and constructed thereon a theory of the world. No method was at hand for criticizing and interpreting these elements of culture, inherited from the past, in the light of present conditions and needs. The prophetic insight of the Hebrew seers, the speculative and creative genius of the Greek philosophers and artists, the practical wisdom of the Roman jurists—these belonged to a day that was dead. The best that moral earnestness, unillumined by native genius and untaught by personal experience, could do was to fall back on the ideas and institutions of an earlier and wiser age and stamp these with the authority of a divine revelation.

But the urgency of the immediately practical situation was not the only motive for the dogmatism of mediaeval theology. Its ultimate concern was, not to provide the foundations of the world that now is, but rather to point the way to the world that is to be. It was not so much concerned with establishing and maintaining the natural order as with mediating to immortal souls the reality of the supernatural order.
Thus the religious object at this time was the supernatural or the trans-experiential order as over against the natural order as given in everyday experience. The religious object, however, was not always so conceived. An empirical study of the origin and development of religions serves to eliminate certain intellectualistic presuppositions as to the essential character of the religious interest. In particular, it appears that the effort to describe primitive religions as involving a more or less conscious attitude of worship toward supernatural beings or deities, or as involving more or less conscious sense of communion with a supernatural order, is based on a false analogy growing out of an inadequate psychological analysis. A more adequate analysis from the point of view of functional psychology shows that primitive religion so far from being essentially intellectualistic, or so far from involving supernatural factors, was bound up with the vital life-giving, life-preserving activities of the social group, and was in reality the expression of the group's attitude toward these activities. The origin of religion is to be sought in the origin of the social consciousness. "The religious consciousness is to be identified with the consciousness of the greatest values of life. . . . . This sense of value is the feeling of the worth of life which expresses itself in the demand for self-preservation." Whatever objects preserve and promote life, such as sources of food supply, means of social organization, and the like, come to have religious significance and finally get themselves accepted and worshiped as deities. But these deities are not necessarily supernatural. They simply represent the highest social values. And this conception of the divine as the embodiment of the highest social values persists throughout the history of religions. This accounts for its constantly changing content. For example, in the earlier periods of Hebrew history, the divine was identified with certain forms of animal life which happened to be the chief source of food supply. Later on when the tribes united to form one social and political organization, the maintenance of the integrity of this organization against the trickery and the treachery of hostile groups came to be the matter of supreme concern, whereupon the divine was conceived after the fashion of a mighty monarch, whose function it was to preserve the social and political integrity of his people. With the downfall of the nation and the collapse of the existing social order, new values were conceived and embodied in the person of Yahweh. These new values were partly ethical. Yahweh could no longer be a tribal or national god and retain the respect of his defeated and disheartened people. He must henceforth