THE COMMON SENSE OF WILLIAM JAMES: WHY HIS THOUGHT HAS BECOME THE THOUGHT OF THE PEOPLE: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

The late William James once said of the philosophy which was to him the truest expression of life as he saw it, that it was significant to humanity because it was "never separate from reality, never remote from common sense, and never forgetful of the common man." His complete identification of himself with the essentially modern spirit of inquiry that we know as Pragmatism was natural and inevitable, because the man himself was so normal and truthful in his way of thinking, so untiring in his endeavor to gain some real understanding of life, that of necessity he expressed as nearly as possible in its entirety the spirit of his age and nation. He was the acknowledged leader of philosophical thought and research in America, because he voiced so clearly the underlying genius of the American people. His one test for every thought, feeling or act was its workability. He held that each and every theory, whether dealing with the most trivial conditions of daily life or dropping its plummet boldly into the depths of infinity, must earn its right to live by accomplishing some definite result. Every philosophical abstraction that presented itself to his mind had to undergo the test of a frank and bold application to concrete conditions, for, however high he might soar in his lifelong search for the ultimate verities, the feet of this intensely human and modern philosopher were always planted firmly upon the solid ground.

How many people understand exactly what is meant by Pragmatism? We associate the word as a matter of course with the ordinary definition of the word "pragmatic," which comes as nearly as possible to being diametrically opposite to the whole spirit of this new, and yet old, conception of philosophy. Yet, if we look beyond the sort of Pragmatism that is distinctly of the earth earthy, we find that the word means also a system of thought which occupies itself with the scientific evolution of causes and effects, rather than circumstantial details; a system that is practical because it admits only those theories which have reference to human happiness and serve to promote human welfare. In other words, it is merely everyday common sense raised to the realm of the universal. As Professor James himself described it: "Pragmatism has no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis; she will consider any evidences. . . . In short, she widens the field of search for
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God. . . . She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact, if that should seem a likely place to find Him. . . . Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us and what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience, nothing being omitted."

The whole career of William James shows the natural evolution of a clear, honest and direct mind; a mind keenly interested in every phase of life and open to the reception of every new idea; a mind that was to all intents and purposes absolutely devoid of prejudice because, untroubled by precedent or dogma, it went straight to the heart of things. The public at large knows him as the expounder of a system of thought that to the modern man is as clear as his mother tongue, but thousands of individuals know him even better as the beloved teacher whose very presence was an inspiration to his students, and as the man who, so far as human contact went, was everybody's friend because he possessed the insight that pierced through all masks and saw the real man underneath. "This instinct for humanity was so strong that, after years of the kind of training and work that almost inevitably leads a man to regard his fellows from a remote and impersonal point of view, as types that illustrate this or that theory or principle of psychology, his distinguishing characteristic was that his real interest was always in men, not man.

ENDOWED by heredity with an open and adventurous spirit and an insatiable interest in everything that presented itself to him, his early life and education offered the best possible soil for the growth of those qualities which afterward made him famous throughout the intellectual world. His father, the elder Henry James, was a profound and brilliant thinker, who carried out with uncompromising thoroughness his theory of training his sons toward the fullest development of individuality and independence. As a consequence, William followed without restriction his own bent toward investigation in many directions. Entering the Lawrence Scientific School in eighteen hundred and sixty-one, he received a thorough training in chemistry, and then took up the study of plants and fishes under Agassiz, sharing the latter's investigations in South America. The study of medicine followed almost as a matter of course. He took his degree of M.D. in eighteen hundred and seventy, but instead of practicing, he turned his energies to teaching, reëntering Harvard as an instructor in comparative anatomy and physiology. It is characteristic of the man that even at this time, when the natural enthusiasm of youth might very easily have led him to concentrate
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all his energies upon one pursuit, he was developing another side of his nature by studying art with William Hunt, one of the most strongly individual painters of his day. The study of physiology led by natural gradation to that of psychology. It was almost inevitable that, being William James, he should turn by degrees from matter to mind and from the study of the body to that of the soul. The early influence of his Swedenborgian father had fostered the natural tendency of the boy toward speculation and inquiry in the realm of the super-physical. The study of physiology was for him merely the foundation for a clear understanding of psychology, and his subsequent entrance into the wider field of philosophy was, in the course of a development so natural that it was inevitable.

He began by interpreting the psychological theories of Spencer, but of course ended by working out new ones of his own. A separate chair of psychology was created for him at Harvard in eighteen hundred and eighty-nine, and a year later he published the book which almost immediately made him famous throughout the scientific world,—his "Principles of Psychology," which had been in the making for more than nine years. The book gave a complete exposition of what is now known as the Lange-James theory of psychology; a theory which has gained ground steadily ever since the publication of this epochal work, and which now lies at the foundation of all our modern conceptions of psychology. In a nutshell, it teaches that our feelings are the result rather than the cause of our instinctive reactions against impressions from without; in fact, that bodily conditions exercise a determining influence over all moods. As Professor James expounded it, it was a theory of the soul which followed with absolute truthfulness the deductions that had resulted from close study of the soul's physical expression,—the body. More than that, it was a theory set forth in language sufficiently clear and simple to be understood by the common man. It has been a favorite slur against William James to accuse him of "writing psychology like fiction" for the sake of drawing the contrast between him and his brother Henry, who "wrote fiction like psychology," but the cheap smartness of the epigram may be forgiven because it stated the truth in that it expressed the human quality in his philosophy, the quality that made it at once the philosophy of the people. Instead of tangling what he had to say in a forest of involved expressions and technical terminology, he stated it as simply as possible, frequently making his meaning clear by the frank use of colloquialisms and even slang,—when slang expressed what he meant. His keen sense of humor always stopped him on the brink of any temptation to follow an argument into regions where logic takes the place of life, for at such
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moments, to use his own words: "I hear that inward monitor, of which W. R. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word 'bosh'."

THE natural tendency of Professor James' psychological researches was to lead him steadily toward the realm of philosophy. At his own request he was transferred to the chair of philosophy at Harvard in eighteen hundred and ninety-seven, when he published the first definite announcement of his conception of Pragmatism in "The Will to Believe and Other Essays." After that the greater part of his time was given to the defense and the clarifying of this philosophical method, which appealed peculiarly to him because it insisted on the correlation of all philosophy to the conditions and circumstances of real life. He made no claim to the discovery of Pragmatism, which has appeared in one form or another in numerous philosophical systems throughout the ages, having had special influence over the theories of Kant, and was introduced into modern philosophical thought in eighteen hundred and seventy-eight, when Charles Peirce wrote an article for the Popular Science Monthly of that year,—entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." His argument was that beliefs are really rules for action; that to develop the meaning of a thought we need only determine what conduct it is fit to produce, because conduct is for us its sole significance. Partly because of its very simplicity and naturalness, Peirce's theory remained unnoticed until Professor James brought it forward twenty years later in a lecture delivered before the students of Stanford University in California. The choice of place and audience was wise, because the men of the West are notoriously open-minded and welcome everything new that can show a good reason for being. They grasped at once at the idea that the whole function of philosophy ought to be the finding out of the difference it would make to the individual at definite instants of life if this or that world-formula were accepted as the true one. Being nothing more than the avowed application of empiricism to philosophy, the pragmatic method of thought was specially calculated to appeal to the plain common sense of the typical American, who is himself a pragmatist in all the affairs of life, in that he is prone to turn away from all abstractions toward facts, action and power.

Nevertheless, considerable misunderstanding and opposition were aroused by the publication of "Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking," because in this book Professor James took the bold stand that he recognized as truth only those things which have meaning and importance in man's life, and also his belief that by the exercise of selective power man is able to influence the realities which he encounters; that he helps to make truth and to reconstruct
the world itself in so far as it touches him; above all, that man is not a helpless victim of fate that is made by a power wholly outside of himself. One reason that Pragmatism appealed so strongly to William James was because he realized, as he said, that it "unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets everyone at work." Sometimes he shocked people by the bluntness with which he expressed this idea, as when he wrote: "The prince of darkness may be a gentleman, as we are told he is, but whatever the God of earth and Heaven is, He can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trials, even more than His dignity is needed in the empyrean."

From this it was an easy transition to the pluralistic theory of the universe which has excited so much comment and opposition in late years. Professor James made no empty assertion in claiming that his was the philosophy of open-mindedness, for he did not regard it as beneath his dignity to investigate anything that promised to throw even a tiny ray of light upon the subject. The unusual always had for him a compelling interest, and the people who regarded his explorations in psychical research and his attitude toward Christian Science as evidence of failing mental powers, simply had no understanding of the man as he was. He investigated everything; allowed everything a hearing and a fair trial, but accepted nothing that could not stand the test of hard common sense. He was as honest in confessing a failure as he was in asserting a truth or claiming a merit, but the hardest thing on earth for most people to understand is a man so honest that he is not afraid even of a thing that may for a time make him appear ridiculous. The full storm of opposition broke when Professor James retired officially from the chair of philosophy of Harvard about twelve years ago, in order to devote his whole time and energy to the completion of the works which he had planned. These works were not all completed, nor would they have been had he lived to the century mark, but enough was done to open to the eyes of the ordinary man the conception of a new heaven and a new earth that may be comprehended in its fulness by anyone who will take the trouble to try honestly to understand the meaning of the common things of life.