

Philosophy and the New Left

Part 1 of 5

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The present discussion is not a continuation of the line of thought developed in the last taping and delivered on Sunday, November 22.¹ That line will be continued at another time and in due course. But as a result of the discussion that was aroused at the time of the delivery of that tape, I at last have a partial expansion of understanding of what is operating within the New Left. I already know that there is a line of influence which emanates from the thought of Professor Marcuse, which involves a combination of a modified Marxism and a modified Freudism. That line I have not yet assimilated, but propose to do so and will deal with it some other time. But, at the close of the presentation last Sunday in the discussion, one of the representatives of the New Left brought out the fact of his orientation to the philosophy of Bergson. This rang a bell in my memory and enabled me to see that the anti-rationalism of the New Left is a simple carrying out of the anti-intellectualism and pro-vitalism that is so characteristic of that school of philosophy known as Pragmatism and which is exemplified most completely by Henri Bergson. Now, it so happens that there was a time when I espoused the position of Henri Bergson, and, in fact, the thesis that I prepared for the seminar in metaphysics of which I was a member during the year at Harvard, was a presentation of a position in accord with the basic assumptions of Bergson himself; and I, there, had to defend this position against the critique of the other members of the seminar. This has proved to be a valuable experience, and I'd like to say a word concerning the values of philosophies as a whole.

I would say that there never has been a philosophy that had any influence whatsoever which did not have some principle of truth in it, something of value, something that needed serious consideration. Thus, I would say that there is no such thing as a wholly false philosophy. The critique of philosophies, therefore, should not so much follow the line of trying to prove that any philosophical position is wholly false, but rather to give a due appreciation to that which it may have which is valid and then a critique of its limitations or inadequacies as a presentation of the whole of truth. There is a tendency, it must be admitted, among philosophic thinkers to present their positions as though here at last was the one and only true philosophy. I hold that that is an impossible goal, and for these reasons. First of all, consciously or unconsciously every thinker takes some position or perspective from which he views the world, life, or the subjective nature of man. This I have called the "base of reference" and elsewhere it has been called "standpoint." In most cases this is not given explicitly, and, therefore, there is produced the impression that the thinker is speaking from a universalistic point of view, which, in point of fact, is a human impossibility. Man views the world and himself from some

¹ See the audio recording, "Collectivism and Individualism."

perspective or base of reference, knowing this fact or not knowing this fact. And from that base or perspective a view of the world may be developed that is substantially valid with respect to that perspective alone, but may be quite false when viewed from the basis of a different standpoint. And then we must say that the point of view has only a partial or limited validity, is not wholly false, but is not totally comprehensive.

Ralph Barton Perry, in his book the *Present Philosophical Tendencies*, finds four such groupings of philosophic systems known as follows: Naturalism, Pragmatism, Neo-Realism, and Idealism.² There are many thinkers who are to be found in one or another of these groupings; and this orientation, however, seems to be true of all of these groupings. First of all, that the Naturalists are oriented to the methods of physical science and extrapolate that methodology into a philosophic statement either naive or critical. Secondly, the Pragmatists are typically oriented to the life sciences so that with them the categories of life and of psychology occupy a position of premiere importance. Pragmatism is rather radically non-metaphysical; whereas, Naturalism, particularly in its naive form, tends to a non-critical metaphysical extrapolation. Neo-Realism is oriented most predominantly to the modern logic of mathematics and is, therefore, quite technical and difficult to understand by the non-mathematical mind. Idealism, on the other hand, is oriented to the “being that knows,” the cognizer, and that implies that it’s oriented preeminently to consciousness and views the world problem from this perspective. It tends toward a critical metaphysical statement, as contrasting to the non-critical, non-sophisticated metaphysical extrapolation of the naive Naturalist.

Having thus, through a brief process of orientation, placed the position of Pragmatism in the context of the principle philosophic movements of the present, we’ll turn our attention more particularly to Pragmatism itself. It is generally recognized as the great philosophic, or principal philosophic contribution made by America, for it generalizes, on the basis of practicality, the use of the cognitive and administrative faculties or functions that bear upon practical problems—perhaps a reflection of what was necessary for the actual conquest of a new country and adapting it to the support of human life in quantities far vaster than was true in the case of the Indian cultures. Pragmatism is most particularly non-metaphysical. It speaks of the various functions or faculties in their normal, ordinary usage. It is a philosophic acceptance of the basic orientation of the man in the street, but raising that kind of thinking up to a position worthy of academic consideration. The names associated with this movement that stand out as of greatest importance are C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey (all three Americans), and F.C.S. Schiller of England, and finally Henri Bergson of France. All of these men represent a particular line of emphasis; some approaching the subject from an epistemological point of view, as in the case of William James, but from the standpoint of life, in the biological not the metaphysical sense, as in the case of Henri Bergson. We are not concerned too much with the problem of differentiation between these different thinkers, but let us get a general orientation as to the perspective that is characteristic of all of them. This I will take from Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, and there neglecting an earlier usage of the term ‘pragmatism’ or ‘pragmatic’ that can be

² Ralph Barton Perry, *Present Philosophical Tendencies* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912).

traced to Immanuel Kant, will take up the interpretation of Pragmatism in the modern sense. This was contributed by C.S. Peirce as follows:

[Pragmatism is] (2) The opinion that metaphysics is to be largely cleared up by the application of the following maxim for attaining clearness of apprehension: ‘Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’³

Now before going on, I will point out certain implications that follow from this maxim. It is the emphasis of practical bearings, which, in effect, is an emphasis of the principle of action. If the conception had metaphysical bearings, had something bearing upon the great problems of immortality, God, and freedom, in not the pragmatic or practical sense but in the larger sense that is so important for religion and philosophy, those would not be recognized as any part of the conception—that all of the conception, in fact, is its practical bearing, what it means for action. Now continuing from the text, there is a portion contributed by William James, and that is as follows:

The doctrine that the whole ‘meaning’ of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected, if the conception be true; which consequences would be different if it were untrue, and must be different from the consequences by which the meaning of other conceptions is in turn expressed. If a second conception should not appear to have other consequences, then it must really be only the first conception under a different name. In methodology it is certain that to trace and compare their respective consequences is an admirable way of establishing the differing meanings of different conceptions.⁴

From these two statements, we see how strongly the philosophy here is oriented to action in the mundane sense; nothing here that implies any orientation to a supermundane position. Now, if we go further in the presentation of this, we find a statement by C.S. Peirce that I think is very revealing. Peirce goes on to say:

This maxim was first proposed by C.S. Peirce in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January, 1878 (xii. 287); and he explained how it was to be applied to the doctrine of reality. The writer was led to the maxim by reflection upon Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Substantially the same way of dealing with ontology seems to have been practiced by the Stoics. The writer subsequently saw that the principle might easily be misapplied, so as to sweep away the whole doctrine of incommensurables, and, in fact, the whole Weierstrassian way of regarding the calculus. In 1896 William

³ James Mark Baldwin, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1911), 321.

⁴ *Ibid.*

James published his *Will to Believe*, and later his *Philos. Conceptions and Pract. Results*, which pushed this method to such extremes as must tend to give us pause. The doctrine appears to assume that the end of man is action—a stoical axiom which, to the present writer at the age of sixty, does not recommend itself as forcibly as it did at thirty.⁵

Now, that last remark of Peirce is rather revealing. In other words, Pragmatism is primarily oriented to action, to the principle of restlessness; and, as this principle of restlessness is most marked in the young creature, the child, the young creature whether animal or human, therefore there is a strong appeal in Pragmatism to the young, which as Peirce confesses, becomes far less attractive “at the age of sixty.” And he goes on later to say that it appears to the older, the more mature man, that action is not really an end in itself, but rather a means to an end; and, that in a degree at least, general judgments, general propositions, have that terminal value for the more mature consciousness that was lacking in the case of the young.

Now, all of this fits and throws a light upon the present tendency among the revolutionary young people. They are young and they’re extrapolating the psychological and physiological tendencies of the young as a universal principle of truth—very crude thinking indeed. As young people, we love action because we have energy; therefore, a philosophy that finds its objective in action makes a strong appeal. But that is no basis for an adequate universal point of view. It is fundamentally bucolic. To be sure, action has its place, but action for the sake of action is just the most meaningless thing that one can possibly imagine.

Perhaps it will be profitable to us to consider something of the differences, the personal emphases, of these different pragmatic thinkers and also to reveal something of my own familiarity with this whole field of thought. First of all, John Dewey regarded conceptual knowledge as the only possible kind of knowledge, contrasting with William James who, in addition, regarded perception as a form of knowledge. I myself agree with William James this far, but add to both the conceptual and perceptual forms of knowledge a third one which I call “introception.”

The head of the philosophy department at Stanford in my day was a Dewey disciple. He taught three courses; one was a seminar in metaphysics in which the text was the book on metaphysics by Taylor.⁶ Taylor was one of the English neo-Hegelians. The purpose of this employment of such a text upon the leader of the seminar was to have an object to attack polemically. His position was maintained in the form of repeated attacks upon the assumptions in the metaphysical statement of Taylor. My own position at that time was usually in a defense of Taylor, and that helped to keep our meetings rather interesting. He taught, also, the course on ethics using the text of Dewey and Tufts.⁷ I would say that in this field of practical ethics, the Pragmatists reveal their greatest strength. The premise in this treatment was not a formulation of an established ethical

⁵ Ibid., 322.

⁶ Alfred Edward Taylor, *Elements of Metaphysics* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1904).

⁷ John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1908).

code valid for all time, but rather maintained a position that moral conduct was in a process of development and that there arises, time after time, a situation in which there is an ethical problem. These critical moments were the moments when the ethical process was most evolved. It was a process of evolving a mode of conduct that diverged from that which had been current before to a position that was more valid for the current situation. There were, however, certain governing principles and these were taken from the four virtues of Plato such as courage, temperance, conscientiousness, and so forth. But these were not interpreted in their most elemental sense, but as monitors in dealing with the ethical situation that had to be worked out in the form of a new norm of conduct. Ethics was, thus, viewed as a developing art much more than as an established science. I would say that this was a very mature approach to a very practical problem and that in all of my experience of the Pragmatic school of thought this is the region in which they exemplify the greatest strength. The other subject taught by this professor was inductive logic, a subject in which it would be natural for the Pragmatist to have a larger understanding than would be the case with the formal logic, which was taught by another professor.

Now let us turn to F.C.S. Schiller, the English Pragmatist. In contrast to Dewey, James, and Peirce, Schiller may be called the idealistic Pragmatist or the subjectivistic Pragmatist, whereas the other three more largely realistic and objective in their outlook. The Pragmatism of Schiller may very well be at least a hidden factor in the development of the present youth movement operating through Sartre. This would develop, or be evident by reason of the following considerations.

Schiller emphasizes a view which is more or less present among all of the Pragmatists but which is accentuated by him, namely, that the act of knowing makes reality. This implies that the cognitive function, particularly in the sense of conceptual cognition, is *creative* rather than *representative*, which is the more realistic view of cognition. Now, if this creativeness of the act of knowing is given absolute authority, we can get into a position where one views creativeness as the all in all and that there is no reality that stands as a modulus governing truth judgments. This, as I understand it, is the position maintained by Sartre, and it can lead to a rather, or completely, undervaluation or non-valuation of norm or standard; whatever one chooses to create is valid and is not to be measured or judged by considerations of norm or standard. Out of this there can grow a radical anarchism, everyone creating without discipline, and that, in fact, leads to chaos. We've seen the evidence of tendencies like this in the youth movement, and the dangers involved from a practical standpoint are very obvious, for, where there is not agreement between different creative efforts, where there is conflict, there can be resolution only by war or the equivalent of war. I would establish my creative position by putting down all other positions that were incompatible with it, not by a test through reason, but by a conflict of force. This element we can see very strongly manifested in the youth movement and it may well be that we do have an extension of the Schiller influence operating here.

Now, is knowing a process of representation or a process of creation? I can see a possibility of something of both present in the total process, and I so represent it. An illustration may throw some light upon this. When Riemann arbitrarily assumed that no line could be drawn through a given point which would be parallel to a given line in the plane of the point, which means that all lines would intersect in a finite distance, it was a

creative act so far as he was concerned. But when Einstein built up an integration of the observed facts operating in the cosmos, his system had to make use of the construction produced by Riemann. Now, it so happened that the facts of observation fit this system; in other words, the testimony of sense perception, which is fundamental in all observation, fit a construction that originally was purely creative. What does this imply? That on one hand it may be assumed that the cosmos about us is merely an invention, the conception of it, and that a different line of imaginative thinking might have fit just as well. There is no evidence to support that. This system and not any other system was the one that Einstein found which was adequate to integrate the refined perceptions of physical science. The refined perceptions were not themselves invented; they are the equivalent of hard, non-constructed, fact. Yet a purely creative invention fit these facts and integrated them into a system. Now, it must be admitted there's something of creativeness here, but there is also something of hard necessity; for, the development of the geometry of Riemann followed rigorous logical form. Once the assumption concerning the parallel axiom was made the rest followed formally and rigorously and could not be made as he pleased. In other words, we have a combination of invention and necessity. Not any invented conception would have integrated the perceptions of the physicist. This one did. That point, I think, is important. And the implication is that in conceptual thinking it may well be true that we invent, but we also represent; that there is an order behind things which is not anything that we please; that invention, which is a creative act, is no doubt a part of the picture. But we cannot say that any invented idea, free from all criticism, is equally valid when compared to any other invented idea. That would be a condition of absolute anarchy, if one took the counter position.

Before we depart from our consideration of the influence of Schiller, perhaps an experience of my own in connection with this line of thought may be worthy of reference. One of my former friends, now deceased, was a disciple of Schiller and had the privilege of meeting him in person. This friend and I often had discussions on the subject of philosophy; he usually presenting positively the Pragmatic point of view while I took the critical position with respect to this philosophy. One thesis he often presented was that all thinking is wishful-thinking. Wishfulness and creativeness are very likely to be closely allied, but my basis of dispute with respect to this position was largely fortified by facts connected with the experience of mathematics. No doubt, one may design a system of postulates from which he may develop an extraordinary type of geometry or an extraordinary type of algebra; the selection of the postulates may be arbitrary in the logical sense, but the development from those postulates is logically determined. You cannot think as you please after you have once established the original, fundamental assumptions. The principle of necessitarianism enters into the picture and the development of consequences is entirely independent of one's wishfulness. This is a fact well known in the field of thought and a fact that should not be neglected, for, after all, the supreme accomplishment of Western culture lies in its mathematical development and the supreme power whereby our technology has become possible is nothing other than applied mathematics itself. I would say that in precisely this field lies the greatest achievement of Western culture and also one of the major achievements of the classical culture before; and, in deed, that in this field lies the main contribution of Western man as contrasted to Eastern man, for any development of mathematics in the ancient Eastern cultures was relatively quite primitive. I have not only, in the case of discourses with this

person, but with the discourses with other Pragmatists, made this point, and it was always the weakest place in the whole Pragmatic theory of knowledge. They had no adequate answer as to how mathematics, and here I mean pure mathematics, is possible. It is not derived from experience; it is not empiric. In part, it is abstraction from the empiric body of accumulated fact, but more profoundly, it develops, as Spengler pointed out, by the power of Vision, spelt with a capital 'V'.

In dealing with the life sciences, in dealing with matters that belong to art, which means to action, to performance, Pragmatism has made a very real contribution. But, just as in the case of the older empiricistic school of philosophy, namely, that of which the names of John Locke, Bishop Berkeley, and David Hume are the most important, there is no explanation that is in any sense adequate for seeing how pure mathematics is possible. The mathematician, if he is a real mathematician, has no concern as to the form the answer to any problem may take; whatever is proven is satisfactory. This is the opposite of wishful-thinking—a point of supreme importance. Here we have a function that produces a representation of truth, not a creation of truth.

Wishful-thinking is a fact though. The objection which I have raised is to the statement *all* thinking is wishful-thinking—a statement which I believe is demonstrably false. But, if we were to say that some thinking is wishful-thinking, that is perfectly valid and rather obvious. This is an identification of a mental function which in the Theosophical schema is called "*kama-mana*," and since *kama* means desire, it would be equivalent to desire-thinking or wishful-thinking. Aurobindo's terminology recognizes an aspect of the mental principle which he calls "vital mind," which is quite different from the central, essential mental principle itself. Vital mind is a sort of contribution from the mental level to the vital level which serves to aid life in its adaptation to circumstance. And I might add here that the Pragmatic interpretation fits, in considerable degree, the conception of vital mind as given by Aurobindo, but falls far short of being an adequate interpretation of mental functioning in its pure form. The Theosophical schema includes a higher aspect of mind which is commonly called "higher *manas*" and this would correspond very well with Aurobindo's conception of the more pure mental function, which, in turn, is regarded by him as a projection from the Supramental plane, represented, even, in the color correspondences—the Supramental corresponding to the golden color, the mental to the yellow color.

But, we can see the action of wishful-thinking. When one uses thought to achieve an objective, such as the building of a business, or the building of an empire, or the production of a work of art, and I might list many other things, clearly there is wishfulness here, and the mind is used as an implement to aid the actualization of that which is wished for. In the disciplines that are called scientific, we can see the action of wishfulness in some parts of science, less in others. It is least noticeable in the physical sciences, particularly physics, more noticeable in the life sciences, and almost predominant in the social sciences where one is very conscious of a wishfulness that distorts the validity of the thinking. Modern sociology is more wishful than logical.

It is significant that Schiller writes, quoting:

That the Real has a determinate nature which the knowing reveals but does not affect, so that our knowing makes no difference to it, is one of those

sheer assumptions which are incapable, not only of proof, but even of rational defense. It is a survival of a crude realism which can be defended only, *in a pragmatist manner*, on the score of its practical convenience, as an avowed fiction.” [Then] Since reality [from the pragmatist point of view] is essentially what it is in the knowledge process, Schiller naturally concludes that “ontology, the theory of Reality,” is “conditioned by epistemology, the theory of our knowledge”; and since the knowledge process [again from the pragmatist point of view] is essentially practical it is proper to conclude that “*our ultimate metaphysic must be ethical*.”⁸

“Ethical,” as here used, is to be understood in its most primitive or fundamental sense, as identical with the art of conduct, not simply good conduct; again, an emphasis of the principle of action, of doing.

One thing that is becoming very evident, when you consider this total background, that from this point of view, which is generally known as Pragmatism, we have no modulus for the adjudging of one line of conduct or of thought as being essentially good, while another is evil or dark in its nature. Let us take an example, the course of conduct of Genghis Khan, on one side, and that of the Christ. Genghis Khan was the outstanding conqueror in known history and the most successful of the conquerors. Rather early in his career, he advanced westward into Persia and conquered the country with his Mongol hordes and returned to his native land. But then the peoples that he had conquered rose up again and he returned, now applying a principle that would make his conquest sure. This principle was that if you killed-off every man, woman, and child, and destroyed every building so that not one stone rested upon another, the country would not rise up again; it would remain conquered. And this he did. And it proved to be a sound principle. Genghis Khan conquered virtually all of Asia except Japan; he conquered China after having integrated through conquest all clans in Mongolia; he conquered Persia and India and all of Eastern Europe. His dynasty, in the form of the Moguls, ruled India for several generations, in fact, up to the time of the English conquest of India. He himself lived to know a natural death upon his beloved battlefield, and the conquests were continued by his descendants even after his death; and the total accomplishment may be regarded as one of the most successful achievements in our known history. Now, if we contrast to this the standpoint of the Christ, we see that on the side of Genghis Khan we have the principle of vital domination; on the side of the Christ the principle of compassion. What does life say about these? Life blessed Genghis Khan with enormous success, compared with which Christ’s life was a failure, for the movement that followed from him became something very different from what Christ himself stood for, and even eventually resulted in the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition and the persecution and slaughter of so-called witches as in the Salem witchcraft delusion—expressions that are totally foreign to the spirit of the Christ.

Now, on vitalistic grounds, upon grounds that cast aside the principle of norm or standard by which action is to be judged, but purely on the ground of life itself, which can we say was the better? The very success of Genghis Khan is the pronouncement that

⁸ Perry, *Present Philosophical Tendencies*, 215. The bracketed text contains Wolff’s asides.

this is what life approves and that it frowns upon the principle of a compassion imposed from above. There is no basis by which the Vitalists can say that the course chosen by Christ was better than the course chosen by Genghis Khan.

Mayhap this will help to explain how the movement of the New Left could eventuate in such things as the activities of the Black Panthers and that of the Weathermen—purely destructive and murderous. Does life disapprove of this? The story of Genghis Khan does not indicate that it would. There is no reason from the standpoint of vital considerations alone why we should say that those who are compassionate are better than those who slay and destroy in order that a particular grouping in the whole may become dominant. Life looks alike upon all this and seems to reward the warrior more than the messenger of compassion. From the standpoint of life, not from the standpoint of mind or spirit, the lion and the lamb can lie down together only with the lamb inside the lion.