

The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object

A Discussion of the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness

by Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Part 17 of 25

PART III

Introceptualism

CHAPTER 5

Pragmatism

Life, as we know it and as it appears to have always been, judged by the record of history, has consisted most largely of an effort by living creatures to survive in an environment which, while in part friendly, has yet been in large degree unfriendly, toward that survival. The life-story of man appears to be no exception to this rule, and so the preponderant thought and effort of the humankind have been devoted to the practical or mundane interests of securing food and protection from the elements and living creatures, including man himself. But from a day at least as ancient as the formulation of the Vedas there has always been a few among the human whole who have devoted a portion of their time and effort to a profounder querying of nature, with a view to the resolution of more ultimate questions, such as the meaning and purpose of life, the nature of being, and so forth. Out of this deeper and relatively detached questioning has finally developed the profounder part of both religion and art, and nearly the whole of what we today know as science and philosophy, in a word, all that which we class as culture and which contributes the larger part of the graces and values of living. Those who have led in the cultural side of life, either as originators or as continuers, have never constituted more than a small proportion of the human whole, but they have formed an especially significant part, and while they have known their share of resentment and persecution by the non-understanding mass of mankind, yet, in the end and on the whole, they have received appreciation and even recognition as forming a genuine aristoi, a sort of informally recognized class status distinct from other men.

Among the bearers of culture there have inevitably grown attitudes towards life and thought and forms of formulation or expression that tend, more or less radically, to diverge from the attitudes and forms natural to the commonality of mankind. This has led towards a separation of interest and sympathy which at times has amounted to a social bifurcation, so that the languages, as well as the attitudes, of the smaller class tended to become strange and foreign to the collective mass. This inevitably restricted the service which the former could render to the latter, and so from time to time there arises the necessity of re-establishing an integration or working relationship between the two parts.

In the field of philosophy, which most particularly concerns us here, the specialization of interest, way of thinking, of attitude, and of language is especially

notable. Philosophers tend to write for other philosophers and to give exclusive attention to the conceptions evolved in the detached philosophical consciousness. This is all quite understandable since these conceptions are an inevitable development for a felt need and they are adequately comprehended only by the trained philosopher. But there remains a large sector of human concern which is left out, and thus the practical office of philosophy becomes considerably narrowed. In the classical culture, the isolation of the philosophical world from the broader general human world was particularly notable. Such science as there was developed in the milieu of the philosopher, detached from practical life, with the result that, although the Greek mind was able enough and theoretical understanding was well advanced, yet there was relatively little development of a practical technology. Abstract conceptions became objects in themselves, unrelated to empiric utility. A distinction arose ultimately between two orders of consciousness, the one, the more abstract or intelligible, being viewed as a higher more divine order, and the other, the sensuous or empiric, being regarded as irrational and evil. Apparently no culture has ever attained a greater conceptual purity than that which was realized in Greece at its peak of development, but it was a conceptuality unrelated to empiric life. Also, this was achieved at a severe price. At the top of the culture we find an aristocracy of beautiful intellectuality; at the bottom, a massive slavery of bound men; a humanity bifurcated so that the mass received little benefit from the best.

The Greek dominated Western culture up until that day in the Renaissance when the immortal figure of Galileo appeared upon the scene. In the hands of the scholastics dialectical power had become refined and subtilized, but largely empty of substance, and perhaps even more divorced from the world of common experience than was true with the ancient Greeks. However, with the appearance of Galileo an old cycle was closed and a new one opened that has continued to the present time. The significant contribution of Galileo was an insight which led to a marriage of a highly developed conceptuality with sensuous experience, the aspect of consciousness so despised by the typical cultured Greek. Out of this marriage was born science, in the modern spirit, and a vast extension of philosophic subject matter, but, most important of all from the practical standpoint, there came forth from this union technology in the modern sense, and with this vast alterations in social organization and in ways of life.

Although it is inevitable that in the modern world, as in the classical, the conceptions and language of technology, science, and philosophy should be developed with due regard to the peculiar necessities of each discipline, yet the attitude toward sensuous cognition was inevitably radically altered, when contrasted to the attitude of the classical thinker. The sensuous or empiric could no longer remain the despised half of human cognition. Indeed, it has often become the most valued half, with conceptual theory falling heir to the old depreciation. Important as experience no doubt is, yet even experience has taught us that without adequate theory there can be no true science, not even technology, so that today we know that we advance in knowledge, as someone has said, by two legs, one of observation and one of theory. Therefore, we have not repudiated the sound features of our inheritance from the Greek culture, but by adding to it that which the cultured Greek scorned we have transcended him both in theory and in practice.

The rapprochement between conceptuality and sensuous knowledge has naturally involved more than a technical advance. A parallel increased regard for the ways of

cognition, interests, and attitudes of the common man was probably inevitable. This, though particularly marked in the zones of sociology and politics, has yet had its effect in the more aloof field of philosophical speculation. In our own day there has arisen a whole school of philosophy which, questioning the soundness and reliability of lofty conceptuality, has turned to the field of popular cognition and interest for its principal subject matter and basis of evaluation of the higher conceptuality. This school is the one popularly known as Pragmatism.

In the hands of the Pragmatist the kind of thinking, which is the only kind known to most men and the kind which all men use most of the time, in the field of day-to-day life relations, is given the dignity of philosophic recognition. In this sense, Pragmatism is more popular than any other philosophic school, and, indeed, has been peculiarly associated with the democratic spirit. But though Pragmatism renders to the ordinary variety of thinking a dignity of recognition, it would be a vast mistake to imagine that the Pragmatist is merely an ordinary thinker or that this school is popular in its technical methods. Popular thinking is an object for serious study and evaluation, as viewed by this school, but the problems considered are treated with all the technical acuity of trained philosophers. Pragmatism deals in large measure *with* popular thinking as a type, but *is not itself* a form of popular thinking. Pragmatic philosophers in the technical development of their thought can and do become just as involved and obscure as any other kind of philosopher. They are by no means always easy to understand, and so, despite the democratic orientation of their thought, they themselves belong to the intellectual elite like all others who think beneath the surface.

The popularity of Pragmatism is quite different from the popularity of Naturalism. The latter accepts, on the whole, an attitude towards the world-about which is quite consonant with the general naive view that commonly holds before the development of reflective analysis. But the philosophical Pragmatist, like most other professional philosophers, is intelligently critical of this view. He is well aware that thinking and the other psychological functions do make a difference in the content of human consciousness, or, at least, if they do not, this fact must be established by careful study. Whereas the Naturalist typically thinks in terms analogous to those which have achieved success in the sciences of the inorganic, and, as a thinker, very largely forgets that he is a living being, the Pragmatist views life and the sciences of the organic as nearer to the true nature of man and as supplying a better key to the understanding of the contents of his consciousness. Further, this life on which the Pragmatist centers his focus is not an abstract or Eternal Life, but the natural or empiric life seen all about us. It is the life of plants, of animals, and of men—just that which the biologist and the psychologist study in its physical and somatic manifestations, respectively. Indeed, this fact implies that the Pragmatist is also a Naturalist in his way, but instead of being a physical Naturalist he might be called a biological Naturalist. He views biology, and, along with this science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, and so forth, as being essentially more fundamental than mathematics, physics, and the more mathematical sciences generally. In the implied relative depreciation of logic and mathematics we find the primary point at which Pragmatism departs from the New Realism, though in other respects these two schools have many sympathies in common.

The central core of Pragmatic interest is the human world, and not a supermundane Ideal or transcendent Realization. No doubt empiric life involves more

than the exclusively human, since we have constant evidence of other forms of life before our eyes, but Pragmatism does not pretend to speak for the possible standpoint of plants and animals any more than it does for a supermundane Divinity. All these living, or supposedly living, beings may receive consideration in a Pragmatic philosophy, but, if so, they enter into the discussion as objects possessing an empiric human interest. Thus Pragmatism is not, nor does it pretend to be, a comprehensively inclusive system. Its validity, in so far as it is valid, is maintained to be such for man as we know him here and now.

Indeed, Pragmatism does not pretend to be a philosophic system, but is rather conceived to be a definition of a method of approach to vital problems. Here philosophy is viewed as an aid or guide to an empiric life so that it may be lived more wisely, and on the whole more happily. Thus it is more largely a philosophy of and for life than a system of ideas. It may be said that its metaphysic is the least systematic of the four schools.

Pragmatism has many roots which reach back into what is known as the English school of Empiricism. Like Empiricism it gets its stuff, in largest degree, from the raw material derived or given by the senses. But it departs from the earlier Empiricism in that it is much more activistic, that is, more concerned with purposive action than with simple reception of impressions. The Pragmatic world is much more alive than the older Empiricist world. Man's consciousness is certainly considerably richer than a mere blank tablet which is passively receptive to the impact of the environment. Men do have interests and purposes which lead to the selections of certain possibilities presented by the total environment. It is to his interest to survive as an organism, and, beyond this, it is manifest that he seeks all sorts of objects and relationships from the most banal up to the loftiest possibilities. It has remained for the Pragmatist to isolate and accentuate this aspect of human nature as a significant feature for the understanding of him and as an important factor for the facilitating of his growth in understanding. The Pragmatist says that philosophy, even in its most abstract and otherworldly aspect, is, after all, but an instance of human interest and purpose. It is not here suggested that the older philosophers or the representatives of the opposed schools of the present day were or are unconscious of the fact of interest and of selections guided by interest, but it is simply true that generally this fact was neglected as a determinant factor in evaluating philosophic content. At this point the Pragmatist departs from the non-pragmatic thinker, since he maintains that meaning cannot be isolated from the influence of interest.

At this point the Pragmatist's characteristic attitude towards the psychological status of ideas becomes evident. Ideas enter into at least two systems. In one aspect they are recognizable as psychological facts, that is, as something having a history and standing in correlation with a group of more or less observable relations in some living mind, while in another aspect they carry a logically significant content. For the greater part, philosophy has been exclusively concerned with the logically significant content and defined meaning in terms that are mainly logical. Pragmatism says that this is a mistake. Even a perfect and logically complete content would only be, at best, but partly competent in the determination of ultimate meaning, for the psychological factors of interest and purpose are also determinant. In fact, one gains the impression that the Pragmatists characteristically as a class attach the greater importance to the psychological factors, with logic admitted only in a subordinate office.

One practical consequence of the foregoing theoretical evaluation of the psychological status of ideas is that proposed conceptions may be valued as much or even more by consideration of the purpose or motive of the thinker than by a regard for the logical acuity or factual accuracy of the content. Thus psychological facts true of the thinker become important in the philosophical evaluation of the thought. There are connections wherein, no doubt, the psychological conditioning of the thinker is determinant in such a way that the value of the content of the thought is involved. This is clearly true in all cases involving statement of fact, particularly where the fact is not easily verified by other means, and no less so in instances where subjective determinants form an important component part of the content. In general, we may well recognize the psychological factors as possessing a constitutive importance in the zone of reflection where the perceptual referent is correlated with a conceptual statement. But there is a large range of thought wherein the content is purely conceptual and objective. Particularly is this true in the case of the discovery and proof of a mathematical theorem, and only somewhat less so in the theoretical development of any science. In these latter instances the evaluation of the thought content can be made in complete disregard of the thinker as a person. His character may be noble or vile, his personal psychology may be normal or abnormal, and his attitude social or antisocial, but, in any case, his thought is a representation which can be judged as to its soundness quite independently and objectively. Thus it appears to be clear that the psychological evaluation of thought has only a partial validity with respect to the soundness or unsoundness of the content. The Pragmatist has, no doubt, brought into focus a part truth which is philosophically significant, but appears to generalize too far.

It is undoubtedly true that the philosopher, being a man as well as a thinker, is, in his own person, conditioned by psychological determinants which vary more or less radically from individual to individual, and, equally, there can be no doubt but that these factors play their part in providing the basic orientation of the thinker and in giving form and direction to the thought. Unquestionably, criticism which is at all complete must have a due regard for these factors as well as for the more impersonal and rational elements, such as the factuality of references and the soundness of the logic. But if too much stress is given to the psychological determinants, criticism can all too easily degenerate into the error of the *argumentum ad hominem*, and thus we may see philosophy fall from its lofty state of impersonal and detached aloofness. Issues which otherwise would be worked out to agreement, or agreement to disagree, on the high level of the forum may well be carried into the arena for final resolution. Logical issues are resolved in the forum; differences on the level of transcendental vision are resolved by the greater Light manifested by the more comprehensive Realization; but differences based upon psychological factors such as the purpose, interest, and taste of the empiric man, when resolution becomes desirable or necessary, cannot be integrated by either the forum or the Light. In the latter case resolution at least tends to be one worked out by force, either physical or psychological.

An instance of the resolution of philosophic difference by force, and one which today is deeply stenciled on the world memory, is to be found in the incident of German National Socialism. Despite all the crudities of this movement, it was grounded in a philosophy. One who has read and brooded upon both *The Decline of the West* and *Mein Kampf* can hardly help but note practical implications in the latter which find their

philosophical base in the former. The Spenglerian philosophy is one of the most consistent developments of the Vitalistic orientation, in which conceptualism is given radical subordination to the Will and to the psychological factors generally. The conclusion is drawn that war is well nigh the essence of life, and there does not appear to be any ground for viewing this conclusion as something added to the ineluctable consequences of such an orientation. Logic stands as incompetent to resolve fundamental issues. The wars of creatures from the plant to man and of groups and nations are the final determinants. No doubt Spengler resented the form his thought took in the hands of the vulgar Hitler, but this was more the resentment of one with the taste of a scholar and a gentleman for the crudities of a vulgarian, who was no gentleman, than it was for the essence of the Hitlerian philosophy. The fact is that purely vital issues are resolved by conflict, and thus the transcendence of conflict as an ultimate determinant depends upon the subordination of the vital by some higher principle, such as rationality or spirituality. In this fundamental sense, the powers which defeated National Socialism upon the field of battle did not thereby overthrow or disprove the primary thesis of *Mein Kampf*, but merely denied survival to a specific interpretation of that thesis. The irrationalism of a psycho-vitalistic philosophy was not transcended by a rationalistic power, acting in conformity with its own nature, but a specific manifestation of this irrationalism was overcome by a greater irrational power. The total effect is in the form of a confirmation of the primary thesis of Spengler.

The foregoing illustration is pertinent to a discussion of Pragmatism, since “Pragmatism” is, in one of its aspects, but another name for “Vitalism.” In this connection, “Vitalism” must be understood with a broader connotation than is given the same term in more specialized biological theory. Vitalism, here, means a philosophical orientation, such that the categories of life are given priority over the categories of mind or intellect. Now, while it is true that in some systems of thought Life—spelled with a capital ‘L’—is viewed as the ontological or transcendental principle, this is not the sense which is meant by the Pragmatist. The life of the Pragmatist is the natural or mundane life which we experience and know with our ordinary faculties—the life which is studied by the biologist. In this respect the attitude of the Pragmatist parallels that of the Naturalist, with the important difference that biological categories are viewed as more fundamental than physical categories, such as those which are fundamental in physics, astronomy, chemistry, and so forth.

It is quite [ir]relevant to the attainment of an understanding of Pragmatism to ask ourselves the question: What do we mean when we speak of “Life”? We find that besides the conception of Life as a transcendental principle there are at least two contrasted possible meanings. The word may be conceived as meaning a privative concept, defined to comprehend a certain kind of phenomena. In this sense “life” is an object of scientific study of which the end of the program would be an integration of the facts of life within the limits of intellectually comprehensible law. When biology is viewed as essentially a special kind of manifestation of physics and chemistry, this is the standpoint that is taken. The underlying assumption implied by this attitude, either implicit or explicit, is that life is no more than it is conceived to be. It is just another case of knowledge which, while it may not be complete knowledge today, is nonetheless regarded as capable of completion in principle. This implies that conceptual thought has the power to comprehend life and thus is a larger power and not merely one which exists as an effect or by-product of life.

But we may think of “life” in quite a different sense. The word may be viewed as no more than a sort of pointer to a reality which, in peculiar degree, can never be known in the conceptual sense. Thus, while we may know mathematical and other logical entities with conceptual rigor, life forever escapes this kind of knowing. What we really do know of life itself, as distinct from a conceptual symbol meaning life, is through an extra-conceptual acquaintance, namely, through a way of consciousness that can never be fully thought. Thus, around every conceptual thought of life it is believed there lies a sort of penumbral field which is not part of the central thought and which may escape clear analysis entirely, but may be glimpsed, however dimly, in those moments when Consciousness turns upon Itself, as it were, and glimpses a sort of fleeting shadow. This shadow is a fringe about the nuclear core of the concept, known darkly like an intuition which defeats all definition. It may seem that this fringe, rather than the central conceptual core, carries the real secret of the meaning of life. There are many who say that this is indeed so, and that the nature of the fringe is such that no intellectual analysis, however refined, can ever grasp its real nature, and this is the case because it is an essentially inconceivable life which so supports and envelops thought that the latter can never by itself comprehend its living roots. Thus life is viewed as master and thought as the servant. This appears to be the general view held by Pragmatism, and particularly by Henri Bergson.

Doubtless, within non-philosophic and non-scientific circles, the second view given above would generally seem the more acceptable, since to view life as an object implies a relatively exceptional detachment where thought itself, or something greater than thought and empiric life, supplies its own base, or some foundation other than life. Far more commonly, life seems to the consciousness to be a mystical somewhat which conditions all else, but which is not itself conditioned, or, if it is, that higher conditioning is unknowable to the conceptual mind. For the greater part, Western philosophy has not assumed this point of view, but there are philosophic thinkers who have maintained it, such as Spengler and Bergson. These thinkers are classed today as Vitalists.

While it is true that Pragmatism is a form of Vitalism, it by no means follows that Vitalism is always a form of Pragmatism. Thus in the case of Spengler, while in this philosophy we find many features which remind us of Pragmatism, yet the “Life” of Spengler is a notion embracing a good deal more than the “life” of the biologist. With him it is an ontological notion which can be really apprehended only by a mystical intuition. The Spenglerian philosophy is not restricted to the empirically given, in the same sense or in the same degree as is true of Pragmatism. To differentiate the latter more completely we must consider its development out of epistemological considerations.

The epistemological definition of Pragmatism is given very concisely by C.S. Peirce in Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* in the following words: “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.” (Italics mine.)

From the same source we derive a further elaboration of the definition in the following words. Pragmatism is: “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.” (Italics mine again.)

The second quotation above was contributed by the late William James, and, inasmuch as C.S. Peirce and William James were among the half-dozen or so thinkers who were most prominent in the early development of Pragmatism as a philosophical school, we may, with substantial reason, regard the foregoing definition as authoritative. A close study of this definition reveals that four words are crucial in the determination of its meaning. These are: ‘practical’, ‘conduct’, ‘experience’, and ‘whole’. In order to arrive at reasonable precision, we will consider these [their] definitions as given in the same source.

1. The *practical* “. . . covers all that is not theoretically or cognitively determined, but which involves purpose, teleology, striving, achievement, appreciation, ideals.” This meaning is akin to that of *practice* which in turn is defined as “Conduct, or moral activity, as distinguished from the strictly intellectual life.”
2. *Conduct* is “The sum of an individual’s ethical actions, either generally or in relation to some special circumstance.” By this definition *conduct* is differentiated from any arbitrary kind of action as is the popular understanding of the term.
3. *Experience* is defined in two senses, psychological and psychic or mental. (1) “Psychological: consciousness considered as a process taking place in time.” (2) “Psychic or mental: the entire process of phenomena, of present data considered in their raw immediacy, before reflective thought has analyzed them into subjective and objective aspects or ingredients.” The last part of this definition is contributed by William James himself, who goes on to say that “. . . it is exactly correlative to the word Phenomenon” as “It is used in a colourless philosophic sense, as equivalent to ‘fact’, or event—to any particular which requires explanation.” The last portion of the quotation is from John Dewey’s contribution to the definition of the word *Phenomenon*.
4. *Whole* is to be understood in the sense of *entire* or *complete*. Thus “whole of our conception” and “whole meaning” imply that there is no additional meaning attaching to the conception over and above that given in the definition.

From the above definitions we derive a very clearly delimited meaning of Pragmatism. We can still further clarify the conception by considering what is excluded by Pragmatism in its use of *meaning* and *truth*. *Meaning* and *truth* are denied to that which is exclusively determined by theory and cognition. This means, for instance, that a self-contained and self-consistent mathematical system which did not lead to anything beyond itself would not be true or have meaning. Sheer self-consistency is thus not a criterion of truth. To be sure, such a system might have an aesthetic value, in which case it would have a degree of truth and meaning, but it would derive this from the value it had for the aesthetic feeling, and not from the purely theoretical or cognitive relations or content. Thus, *truth* and *meaning* clearly depend upon a relation of the cognitive factor to something other than the cognitive thought itself. The word *whole* reveals the privative or absolute character of the Pragmatic thesis. *Truth* and *meaning*, as understood by the

Pragmatist, do not have the signification given above in addition to other applications, but the practical or empiric significance is the *whole* of their signification. Thus, one who accepted the above definitions as substantially valid as a *part* truth, provided the word *whole* were expunged, would not be a Pragmatist.

Quite clearly, Pragmatism is anti-intellectualistic as has been so frequently affirmed by its protagonists. It is anti-intellectualistic both in the psychological and philosophical senses, that is, it denies the theory that the intellectual or cognitive functions are more fundamental than the affective and conative, and, as well, the view that the ultimate principle of the universe is some form of thought or reason or the more modified view that reality is completely intelligible to thought. Pragmatism is also anti-conceptualistic in the classic sense that universals are real *ante res, in rebus, and post res*. Further, it is anti-rationalistic in both the sense of reason being an independent source of knowledge, distinct from sense perception and having a higher authority, and in the sense of a philosophic method which, starting from elementary concepts, seeks to derive all the rest by deductive method, as is the process in mathematics.

So far as these determinations of what Pragmatism is not are concerned, this school does not by any means stand alone, since the older Empiricists maintained the same attitude, and most of oriental philosophy would be in agreement. Clearly, Pragmatism is empiric or aesthetic and essentially nominalistic, but in taking its orientation upon the base of experience defined as a process in time and restricted to the raw immediacy of the sense it departs from the Oriental Aestheticism which embraces non-temporal and non-sensuous aesthetic elements. Further, in its assertion of anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism, Pragmatism has much in common with the voluntaristic wing of Idealism and finds considerable support in the final position of Immanuel Kant. But Pragmatism departs from the general thesis of the older Empiricism in the emphasis it places upon conduct and the practical. The former held a relatively static view of Being, whereas for Pragmatism real being approaches the meaning of activity or becoming, in this respect having a large agreement with the philosophy of Spengler. With respect to voluntaristic Idealism, Pragmatism stands in contrast both in that it is much more realistic and because it is anti-transcendentalistic, in the sense that the whole meaningful content of conceptions consists in a reference to experience and conduct. The antithesis of Pragmatism is to be found in the Rational Idealism of Hegel, and even more so in the highly pure conceptualism of Spinoza.