L. Susan Stebbing

Pragmatism and French Voluntarism

with Especial Reference to the Notion of Truth in the Development of French Philosophy from Maine de Biran to Professor Bergson

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Contents

Foreword from the Editor

Pragmatism and French Voluntarism, published in January 1914, was the doctoral thesis of Susan Stebbing, who was the first woman to hold a philosophy chair in the United Kingdom. Later Stebbing wrote a complete and successful synthesis of ancient and modern logic (*A Modern Introduction to Logic*), and in the dark years of the second world war she was dear to many readers through some books that invited to return to rational thinking with respect to the contemporary political events: *Thinking to Some Purpose* and *Ideals and Illusions*, published respectively in 1939 and 1941, works which were defined "manuals of first-aid to clear thinking".

Pragmatism and French Voluntarism is an account of the epistemological ideas that were widespread and widely discussed in the early twentieth century: it introduces us methodically into the world of American pragmatism and of the many French currents of thought that we usually group together in a generic way under the title of anti-intellectualism, and which culminated in Bergson's philosophy. Why read it today? First of all because inside this book we find a clear and intelligent account, much more valuable and expressive than an encyclopedia entry, of the philosophical currents it deals with. Despite its age, this book is still a useful guide to orient oneself in the contexts of pragmatism and anti-intellectualism of the early twentieth century.

But this is the least of the reasons; the best reason to read this book is that, although it is a work written by the author in her young age and encyclopedic in nature, the personality of the author strongly acts in it. Stebbing was throughout her life an intransigent critic, who never accepted compromise, of each fall into irrational thinking of twentieth century culture. So this book is permeated with awareness of the deeply irrational and inconsistent statements which can be found in the epistemological currents in vogue at the time, and this awareness corresponds to a moral discomfort, clearly and strongly expressed, although still rudimentary and not articulated, because the times were not ripe to study the prevailing irrationalism in the culture of that era. Nor are they still ripe today: so the works of Stebbing are destined to be instruments for the historiography of the times to come, in precisely determining the falls in irrationality and the genesis of specific mythologies that we can recognize in the most

unexpected places of twentieth century culture, and particularly in the science of nature.

Biographic data and basic information about Stebbing are available on the site plato.stanford.edu. See Beaney, Michael and Chapman, Siobhan, "Susan Stebbing", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/stebbing/>.

Note to the 2018 electronic edition

This e-book has been composed on the basis of the original printed edition. The scanned text was carefully controlled, in order to make available to the public a good quality electronic version of Stebbing's work.

The page numbers of the original edition have been preserved in [square brackets].

To facilitate the reading of this electronic edition, the footnotes containing remarks that add something to the main discourse have been marked with an asterisk '*'. Therefore the remaining notes should be consulted only by those who have an interest in identifying the author's sources.

Original Title Page

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Pragmatism And French Voluntarism

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PRAGMATISM AND FRENCH VOLUNTARISM

with Especial Reference to the Notion of Truth in the Development of French Philosophy from Maine de Biran to Professor Bergson

by

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Visiting Lecturer Girton College

Cambridge, at the University Press 1914

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PREFACE

[v] The keen and widespread interest of all classes of readers in the philosophy of Bergson—an interest that was increased by his visits to the Universities of Oxford, Birmingham and London—shows no sign of diminishing. The enthusiasm with which the 'New Philosophy' was at first welcomed seems, however, to be setting in the opposite direction, and the excessive praise and indiscriminating acceptance of his doctrines have now given place to a criticism no less indiscriminating and, perhaps, equally unjustifiable.

In the present state of public opinion, therefore, I venture to offer this essay which, although written from a so-called 'intellectualistic' standpoint diametrically opposed to M. Bergson's, is nevertheless not blind to the interest and importance of his work.

It is the fashion among present day philosophers to depreciate reason, and in the forefront of these are the French Voluntarists—especially the Bergsonian Intuitionists—and the Pragmatists. But in their methods and conclusions they are obviously opposed and an attempt is made to show that in no sense can the French Voluntarists be classed as Pragmatists. In their treatment of the problem of truth this divergence becomes marked. Both, however, fail to give a satisfactory account of truth, the Pragmatist because he identifies truth with one of its consequences, the Bergsonian Intuitionist because he [vi] identifies truth with reality. Hence both resort to non-intellectual methods of determining truth and of solving metaphysical problems. But only, it is urged, by the admission of the non-existential character of truth and by the complete working out of the demands of intellect can we obtain knowledge that is at once complete and rational, hence truly *knowledge*.

In the original form this essay, written during the course of 1911 and completed in the early days of 1912, was submitted to the University of London and gained for its author the degree of Master of Arts. Only a few verbal alterations have been made in the essay itself, quotations have for the most part been translated, and the bibliography has been enlarged and brought up to date. In a paper, entitled "The Notion of Truth in Bergson's Theory of Knowledge," read by the author before the Aristotelian Society in May 1913 some part of this essay was reproduced and has since appeared in the *Proceedings* of the Society.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the Rev. Professor Caldecott for his valuable help and kind encouragement during the writing of this essay and its preparation for the press, and also Miss E. E. C. Jones, Mistress of Girton College, and the Council whose grant made the publication of it possible.

L. S. S.

London, January 14th, 1914.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

R.M.M.		Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale
B.S.F.Ph.		Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie
Rv.phil.		Revue philosophique
D.I.C.	Bergson	Essai sur les Données immédiates de la Conscience
M. et M.	Bergson	Matière et Mémoire
Ev. Cr.	Bergson	L'Evolution Créatrice
P.C.	Bergson	La Perception du Changement
Essais	Renouvier	Essais de Critique Générale (2nd Ed.)
Dil. de la Mét.	Renouvier	Les Dilemmes de la métaphysique pure
Lib. et Det.	Fouillée	La Liberté et le Déterminisme.
Ps. des I.-f.	Fouillée	Psychologie des Idées-forces
Evol. des I.-f.	Fouillée	Evolutionnisme des Idées-forces

I. INTRODUCTION

[1] The philosophy of the present age, no less than its politics, is characterised by the prevailing spirit of democracy, hence by a hatred of authority, a passion for equality and, finally, by a tendency to bring all questions in the last resort to the arbitrament of force.

The basis of democracy is the recognition of the worth of man as man, irrespective of social status, work or capacity. A "government" is worthy of obedience and respect only if it embody the "choice of the people"; there are none so low nor ignorant that they should be denied a voice in the government of their country. The will of the majority must be made to prevail, by force if necessary. In other words, the struggle for existence must be admitted in so far as all who "survive" are to be accounted equally "fit," but is to be condemned in so far as it involves the elimination of the unfit. This contradiction which lies at the heart of democracy is curiously repeated and illustrated in pragmatic philosophy which, partially derived from the anti-democratic philosophy of Nietzsche, is yet a striking outcome of the democratic demand for a purely "human" philosophy of life—a "Humanism" based upon the actual interests and emotions of mankind.

[2] The latter part of the nineteenth century has consequently witnessed the reaction of this ideal upon philosophy which has been gradually permeated with the democratic spirit. No longer must philosophy remain "within the closet"; it must be brought down to the "plain man" whose appeal has lately been so eloquently uttered. It is, indeed, instructive to compare the sentiment expressed by Prof. Jacks in *The Bitter Cry of the Plain Man*[1], with the intellectual aloofness of Mr Bradley's standpoint. Philosophy, says Mr Bradley, must always remain an affair of the intellect; it "will always be hard[2]." In revolt against such a view the "plain man" as represented by Prof. Jacks, appalled by the "supremely forbidding" character of the Hegelian dialectic, protests that "if the truths most important to men explain themselves in this manner, then our lot in this world is dismal in the extreme[3]" and he makes his appeal to

[1] Jacks, *Alchemy of Thought*.
[2] *Mind*, N. S. 51, p. 335.
[3] *Loc. cit*. p. 24.

philosophers,—"Is it beneath you gentlemen, to attend to these by-products of your work, to study the effect of your potions not only on some isolated nerve of the intellect, but as affecting the vital pulse of the human heart?"

The protest that philosophy has been made too hard for the plain man does not confine itself to condemnation of technicalities of language and the uncouthness of German philosophical terminology, but becomes a plea for the recognition of other attitudes towards the Universe than that of regarding it as a "problem-to-be-solved." Life, it is urged, is more than intellect, hence a rational explanation of the Universe could not suffice to satisfy the [3] philosopher as a man; his whole emotional reaction must be taken into account.

Over the philosophers themselves is passing a wave which leads them to bring philosophy into contact with life, to invest it with the charm of personality, and to breathe life into the "dead bones of metaphysics." The natural outlet of this wave is some form of "Voluntarism" which shall lay stress on the active, volitional side of man by denying that intellect is the sole guide to, and judge of truth, or even the dominant factor in its construction. Intellect must not only be dethroned from its proud position as sovereign in philosophy; it must henceforth assume its rightful place as a mere instrument for the furtherance of human activity.

There is a further force at work to revolutionize the philosopher's attitude. The too complete success of the mechanical sciences in the early part of the nineteenth century, coupled with the recognition of the reign of natural law in the animal kingdom brought about mainly by Darwin's *Origin of Species*, has led to a revolt against that mechanical conception of the Universe that reduces it to the dead level of matter in motion and looks for the progress of science in "the extension of the province of what we call matter and causation, and the concomitant gradual banishment from all regions of human thought of what we call spirit and spontaneity[4]."

This "nightmare" conception—to use Huxley's own expression—has provoked a reaction against science as the construction of intellect on the one hand, and on the other—most markedly in France—has led to the admission of contingency into the realm of physical science itself.

[4] Huxley, *Collected Essays*, i. p. 159.

[4] This reaction from a rigid, all-pervading determinism to radical contingency we shall find to be characteristic of French Voluntarism; it is, indeed, in France that the "philosophy of contingency" first attained clear and complete expression.

We find, then, in contemporary philosophy two tendencies: on the one hand a tendency to bring philosophy into closer touch with life and to put contingency everywhere so as to ensure our finding freedom in man; on the other hand a tendency to disparage intellect as the faculty of conceptual knowledge and to turn to some higher form of "perception" as giving a direct contact with reality.

In Pragmatism—whether it be regarded as "epistemological utilitarianism of the worst sort," or merely as a theory of the manipulation of data for the purposes of science—these two tendencies are closely connected. Disparagement of intellect is here an outcome of the desire to bring philosophy down into the arena of "the drudgery and commonplace that are our daily portion[5]," by laying stress on the emotional rather than on the intellectual aspects of life, regarding intellect only as a means to the satisfaction of other needs of man. The end is doing, not knowing. Knowledge is subservient to action and what is useful in the way of conduct becomes the supreme criterion of its trustworthiness. In French Voluntarism, however, the condemnation of intellect is based upon the alleged inability of the intellect to resolve the Kantian antinomies and Zenonian paradoxes that result from the conception of time as a [5] continuum, while the assertion of universal contingency appears to be the outcome of a radically anti-intellectualistic temporalism.

Pragmatism, which frequently claims to be only an epistemological method compatible with the most varied metaphysics, originated in a rule first formulated in the interests of clear thinking by the American mathematician, Mr C. S. Peirce. In his posthumous work James sums it up thus: "The pragmatic rule is that the meaning of a concept may always be found, if not in some sensible particular which it directly designates, then in some particular difference in the course of human experience which its being true will make."

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[5] Schiller, *Humanism*, p. 17.

According to James' earlier statements the doctrine may be summed up: the *practical* bearings of a concept constitute its whole meaning and value. This later substitution of "particular" for "practical" is significant. The word "practical" is of course ambiguous and is susceptible of different interpretations. But it at once lends itself to the construction that "what is 'practical'" is "what affects our conduct in daily life," in the sense in which we distinguish a "practical man" or "man of affairs" from a "dreamer" or "scholar." In considering "practical[6]*" consequences on this view, purposes and [6] needs, i.e. practical interests will be brought to the front, and volition and emotion will have a large share in determining the value of a concept.

Such is the theory explicitly maintained in the "Will to Believe"; the passional nature is raised to the level of the intellectual nature as a determinant of truth.

For purposes of criticism it will be of use to consider just how this conclusion is reached. The problem may be stated: Required—A theory that will satisfy the emotional nature and ensure the satisfaction of its longings and aspirations. Solution: Raise the value of the emotional element, i.e. recognise the right of emotion to enter as a determining factor into the construction of truth. But a difficulty arises. When we believe, we think we believe independently of our emotions and will. However eloquently the "rights" of the passional nature may be stated, however certainly it may be proved that emotional interest does enter into the formation of our beliefs, we are not satisfied unless we are assured that

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[6] The fundamental ambiguity of the word "practical" comes out clearly in an illustration given by James (*Phil. Rev.* 1908. Reprinted in *Meaning of Truth*, p. 209). "When one says that a sick man has now practically recovered... one usually means just the opposite of practically in the literal sense. One means that, although untrue in strict practice, what one says is true in theory, true virtually, *certain to be* true."—But surely what is meant in such a case is just the reverse of what James says. It means, not that it is true that the man has recovered, but that for all practical purposes it *makes no difference* that he has not *quite* recovered, so that it can be said that he is "*practically* well." The whole force of the "practical" here is to deny the strict truth of the statement, whereas on James' theory it must be "true" because there is no *practical* difference in his conduct.

these beliefs are not *only* desirable but *true*. That is, we want to feel that our desires not only do, but "lawfully may" determine our beliefs. A further step must, then, be taken—"What satisfies our needs is true," or, in other words, "what works is true."

Pragmatism has thus become a theory of the nature and meaning of truth, viz. that "truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the [7] way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons[7]."

The fact that Pragmatism was formulated to ensure the recognition of the "rights" of our passional nature is brought out by Dr Schiller's definition of it as "a systematic protest against all ignoring of the purposiveness of actual knowing[8]," which, he points out, is through and through permeated by "interests, purposes, desires, choices, emotions, ends, goods, postulations." The "Spirit" of Pragmatism he describes as "a bigger thing which may fitly be denominated Humanism," and which may be summed up in the dictum "*Homo mensura*."

While, then, Pragmatism claims—wrongly it seems to me—that it is only a method compatible with any metaphysic (as witness the "corridor theory" of Papini), yet, Dr Schiller admits that it points definitely to a metaphysic of voluntaristic type. We thus reach his final definition of Pragmatism as "a conscious application to epistemology (or logic) of a teleological psychology, which implies, ultimately, a voluntaristic metaphysic[9]."

It is, however, as a theory of truth that Pragmatism will be mainly considered in the following study, for it is around the question of the nature of truth that the battle between pragmatism and absolutism is waged, and it is as supplying a criterion of truth that the pragmatist claims novelty for his doctrine.

The criterion that he offers seems to be essentially an outcome of the democratic principle to submit every question to the "poll of the people" and to cut the knot of every difficulty by the "counting of heads,"—or hearts!

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[7] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 76.
[8] *Studies in Humanism*, p. 11.
[9] *Ibid.* p. 12.

[8] It is on this account that Pragmatism has been described as characteristically "American." Dr Schiller has, however, on several occasions denied the "vulgar derivation of Pragmatism from the national American character"—a view that James' unfortunate expression "cash-value" to elucidate the ambiguous meaning of "practical consequences," and his frequent use of American commercial slang in explaining fundamental conceptions, did much to propagate, but which certainly cannot be maintained. Nevertheless, there can, I think, be not the least doubt that Pragmatism is penetrated through and through with the democratic spirit.

But when we turn to consider French Voluntarism we are in an entirely different atmosphere. Here the mark is of detachment from daily affairs and of concern with the innermost life of individual, personal experience; the philosopher looks away from "words" and "actions" to be "tête-à-tête avec sa propre pensée," as Bergson has said of Ravaisson, and which might be said with equal truth of Maine de Biran, the first French voluntarist, and of Bergson himself, the latest and most illustrious. Perhaps one of the strongest impressions left after reading *Les Données immédiates de la Conscience* is the vital distinction the author finds between the self of daily life—the self in which the plain man is predominantly interested—and the fundamental self which underlies the surface self so deeply that a vigorous effort of regressive analysis is necessary in order to penetrate to it—an effort of which the majority of men, including the pragmatists, are quite incapable. Only this fundamental self, however, pierces reality; the superficial self, because under the bondage of bodily requirements and social needs, is condemned to touch only [9] the distorted surface of the real. It is true that Bergson protests that the self must not be regarded as "split up"; nevertheless the distinction established is radical and constitutes an irreconcilable dualism between the two selves.

The "regressive effort" demanded by Bergson is no less beyond the capacity of the plain man than is the vision of a mystic trance. There could not be a greater condemnation of social life, nor a more complete severance of it from all contact with the real. The ultimate reality may be "life," but it is not the commonplace life of ordinary men, the life into contact with which Pragmatism seeks to come and the needs of which it seeks to satisfy.

This is all the more striking because M. Bergson professes as the mainspring of his philosophy the recognition of the necessity of coming into closer contact with life, as opposed to the abstractions of absolutistic philosophies, and here he professes an affinity with James. In England and America as in France, he says, there is a movement to bring philosophy back to a consideration of those vital problems which interest humanity "toute entière" and to abandon the arid discussions of the Schools[10]. Of this movement James is the leader of English speaking peoples, Bergson of French.

Yet, surely their standpoints are radically different. While the pragmatist looks outward for the effects of theory on conduct, while he seeks what practical difference a given theory may make to us as social beings bound together by interest, love and action, Bergson looks downward to penetrate the reality that flows beneath the [10] activities of daily life, and turns away from man as social being to man as individual, and from the standpoint of the real, he deplores the rare, and never complete, achievement of pure individuality.

This difference in outlook is fundamental. It is true that James lays stress on "temperament" and hence is led to emphasise individual differences—or idiosyncrasies—but he deals with men as individuals recognised as such in society and drawing their worth from the society of which they are essential elements. There is in James no trace of the view that in society "we 'are acted' rather than act ourselves" which sums up Bergson's final condemnation of social life from the metaphysical standpoint. If, then, both the American and the French philosopher treat of the "vital problems" which make philosophy "thick," nevertheless their treatment differs widely. Resemblances there are, indeed, between them, resemblances that spring from a common distrust of intellect, but—as we shall see—the distrust leads to diverse conclusions.

There is, however, a point of contact between James and Bergson arising from a non-pragmatic strain in the former due to his love for mystical experience, which, towards the end of his life and while he was greatly influenced by Bergson, seems to have overshadowed the pragmatic elements in his philosophy. Yet even here, in spite of his recognition of a

[10] In Lectures on "Nature of the Soul"—not yet published.

mystical source of knowledge, James himself continued to base his own belief on pragmatic postulation. His leaning towards mysticism may be due, perhaps, to his desire to "open the way to all the winds that blow." But in their view of the nature of truth, hence of philosophic method, James and Bergson are diametrically opposed. We shall find that, in spite of [11] superficial resemblances, the divergence of standpoint is fundamental.

Our purpose, then, is to shew, from a study of French Voluntarism, that, in the course of its development from Kant, while it exhibits in Renouvier an element, which, mingling with the "principle of Peirce," brings forth the pragmatism of William James, it nevertheless developes on independent and even antagonistic lines. On the one hand we find the main line of development in the spiritualistic philosophy of contingency derived from Maine de Biran and culminating in the anti-pragmatic intuitionism of Bergson and the "New Philosophy" of MM. Le Roy and Wilbois; on the other hand is the not less anti-pragmatic philosophy of "*Idées-forces*," which is opposed both to the moralism of Renouvier and to the intuitionism of Bergson.

II. THE NATURE OF FRENCH VOLUNTARISTIC PHILOSOPHY

[12] In France, since the time of Descartes, there has been a close connection between philosophy and mathematics. The study of mathematics fostered the French love of "clearness," and gave rise to the philosophy of clear ideas which has predominated in France from Descartes till the end of the eighteenth century. The main assumption of Mathematical Rationalism is that Reality can be adequately attained by "clearness of conception" which provides sufficiency of evidence. The fundamental conceptions of philosophy being attained with maximum clearness, principles are given from which deductions can be made with mathematical certainty and precision.

(...)

Back cover

Pragmatism and French Voluntarism, published in January 1914, is the doctoral thesis of Susan Stebbing, who was the first woman to hold a philosophy chair in the United Kingdom. It is an account of the epistemological ideas that were widespread and widely discussed in the early twentieth century: it introduces us methodically into the world of American pragmatism and of the many French currents of thought that we usually group together in a generic way under the title of anti-intellectualism, and which culminated in Bergson's philosophy. Why read it today? First of all because inside this book we find a clear and intelligent account of the philosophical currents it deals with. Despite its age, this book is still a useful guide to orient oneself in the contexts of pragmatism and anti-intellectualism of the early twentieth century. Moreover, although it is a work written by the author in her young age and encyclopedic in nature, the personality of the author strongly acts in this book. Stebbing was throughout her life an intransigent critic, who never accepted compromise, of each kind of fall into irrational thinking of twentieth century culture. So this book is permeated with awareness of the deeply irrational and inconsistent statements which can be found in the epistemological currents in vogue at the time, and this awareness corresponds to a moral discomfort, clearly and strongly expressed, although still rudimentary and not articulated, because the times were not ripe to study the prevailing irrationalism in the culture of that era. Nor are they ripe still today: so the works of Stebbing are destined to be instruments for the historiography of the times to come, in precisely determining the falls in irrationality and the genesis of specific mythologies that we can recognize in the most unexpected places of twentieth century culture, and particularly in the science of nature.

Susan Stebbing

Susan Stebbing (1885-1943) was the first woman to hold a philosophy chair in the United Kingdom. In the '30s she wrote an articulated and successful synthesis of ancient and modern logic (*A Modern Introduction to Logic*), and an essay of merciless and radical criticism of the philosophical assumptions implicit in the popular works of Arthur Eddington and James Jeans (*Philosophy and the Physicists*), where are

traced numerous inconsistent and childish regressions to the eighteenth-century rationalism of those authors, without any of the greatness of the philosophers of that century.

Intransigent and non-ideological antifascist, in the dark years of the second world war Stebbing was dear to many readers through some books that invited to return to rational thinking with respect to to the present political facts: *Thinking to Some Purpose* and *Ideals and Illusions*.