

CHAPTER I

KNOWLEDGE AS A VALUE

IT is commonly said—and I think with truth—that the great scientific fact of the nineteenth century was the establishment of the theory of biological evolution. This theory has influenced all branches of thought, not excepting philosophy. We have had, of course, our philosophies of 'creative' and 'emergent' evolution. But I think that a deeper and more far-reaching influence has been visible in the theory of knowledge. Knowledge, like all other human things, has grown up in the struggle for existence. And this reflection has led to the belief that the structure of knowledge and its inner nature, like the structure of the physical organism, has been determined by biological needs. Bergson, William James, Vaihinger, and the pragmatists have emphasized different aspects of this view. And it has come to be thought that, in one way or another, knowledge is the handmaid of practical activity.

This was a new thought in philosophy, a thought which was not to be found in the classical systems of pre-evolution days. For Plato and Aristotle, for Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, knowledge was something—though they hardly considered its historical origin explicitly—which, for all any one could say to the contrary, might have come into existence with a bang, ready made and complete. It was regarded as wholly theoretical, and its theoretical character kept it in a water-tight compartment separated completely from the practical activities of life. Hints and shadowy glimpses of the opposite view may no doubt be found here and there scattered among the pages of the earlier philosophers. But the conception of knowledge as dependent for its structure and even for its validity upon biological needs could not, in the absence of the theory of evolution, penetrate deeply into the marrow of their systems.

This new thought is likely to be abiding in its influence. The theory of knowledge can never return to its pre-evolution attitude. Any epistemology which in the future does

not reflect, at least in some measure, the new insight, is likely to stand self-condemned as unscientific. The philosophies of Bergson and the pragmatists may well be no more, in the forms in which their authors have shaped them, than transient phenomena, symptoms of the passing age. They contain much that is not likely to remain for long acceptable to the scientific mind. But the influence of the thought that action at least in some measure governs knowledge will spread and will become incorporated in the philosophies of the future.

It frequently happens that the originators of a new idea ride it to death, and bring it, for the time being, into disrepute. And this, I fear, has been the tendency of the more extreme among the pragmatists. They have so subordinated knowledge to action that they have destroyed the basis of knowledge. And this has been instinctively perceived by the plain unphilosophical man who conceives that the definition of truth as any belief which 'works' is likely to lead to fantastic results. It would seem, therefore, that a balanced and sane examination of the issues is one of the chief needs of to-day in the theory of knowledge.

For knowledge has been conceived in the past as a *value*. I use the word value here in a special sense, and as practically equivalent to what some philosophers have called 'absolute value'. We commonly speak of food, money, clothes, houses, health, or anything else which we desire, as possessing value. But in the special sense in which I am electing to use the word they do not possess it. When it is said, in common parlance, that such things have value for us, it is meant only that they are things after which we strive because they satisfy our various needs and desires. It is true that the exact psychology of the matter has been the subject of much dispute. But the statement just made is good enough for our present purposes. In addition to the many things which we happen to desire and strive after there exist a few things which we feel are more exalted, and which we *ought* to strive after, whether in fact we do so or not. Common examples are goodness, beauty, and truth or knowledge. (There is a distinction

between truth and knowledge, but that may be neglected for the moment.) The value of these things is believed to differ from the values of all other things in that there is in them an inherent rightness or excellence which imposes upon us an 'ought', an *obligation* to pursue and strive after them. Some people like meat; others prefer fish. But whichever your preference may happen to be, you do not assert that your preference is 'right' and the opposite liking 'wrong'. You do not think that all men 'ought' to prefer fish or meat as the case may be. You do not think that it is their duty to strive after meat or fish. These are matters of taste. *De gustibus . . .* But we *do* think that we 'ought' to prefer the good, the beautiful, and the true, to the evil, the unbeautiful, and the false. It is not here a matter of personal taste, but of one thing being inherently and in itself more excellent than another. The possession of this quality is what I here call value. And from this point of view I say that goodness, beauty, and knowledge possess, or are believed to possess, value; but that butter, eggs, clothes, houses, and the like do not possess it. It will readily be seen that by value I mean much the same as what is commonly meant by the word 'ideal'. Most people would admit that truth is an ideal. But no one would assert that butter is.

Now what I said was that, in the past, knowledge has generally been regarded as a value in this sense. It has been thought of as being an end in itself, as being valuable even when it cannot be shown to have any practical utility. Or at least it has been thought that if a proposition is true, it still remains true even if the knowledge of its truth is useless. That truth is something independent of our wishes and our needs; that it is an august ideal to be sought after even though it might be disastrous to our aspirations; that truth is truth whether we like it or not; that it remains what it is whether it forwards or hinders the success of our practical undertakings; these thoughts have seemed to men to possess genuine validity. And they stand in unyielding contradiction to the theory of knowledge as completely subordinated to action.

One question seems to have been insufficiently pondered by the upholders of the extreme pragmatic view. If knowledge has no purpose except action, what then is the purpose of action? The consideration of this question would carry them outside the bounds of epistemology into the sphere of ethics, which is perhaps not their strong point. And yet they cannot decline the issue. For it is they who have connected knowledge to action. It is they who have insisted that the two cannot be separate. And it is too late therefore to protest that ethical considerations must be given no weight in the theory of knowledge.

We need not inquire what answers may or may not have been given to this question. There is only one answer which is really consonant with the premisses of pragmatism. The justification of knowledge, they tell us, is success in action, and its value—though they do not always say this—is a survival value. The criterion of right thinking is the successful satisfaction of biological needs. Will not the criterion of right action be also biological success? And will not moral ideas have no more than a survival value? Right action, we shall have to think, can only be defined as action which in the long run satisfies human desires. And what are these desires? Not the desire for knowledge, and not the desire for moral goodness. For to think this would be to argue in a circle. If moral conceptions only come into existence for the purpose of satisfying human desires, then those desires (which are the aim and end of life) must be prior to and independent of moral conceptions. And the same applies to knowledge. If knowledge is *only* an instrument, then it is not an end. What other ends can be suggested? The satisfaction of our aesthetic desires? But no one is likely to say that the desires for the satisfaction of which knowledge and morality have been evolved in the struggle for existence are the aesthetic desires. And certainly that is not the answer commonly given by pragmatism.

What desires, then, are left? None, so far as I can see, except the brute desires of the body. I am far from wishing to decry as low or contemptible the body and its

desires. They have their proper place in life, and an honourable place it is. But what I wish to point out is that theories of knowledge and ethics which reduce both truth and morality to a striving after the satisfaction of the non-spiritual desires destroy completely the conception of value which was explained above. Knowledge, in that case, has no aim except to help towards success in action; and action has no aim except the satisfaction of desires. And since these desires cannot be the desires for truth, goodness, or beauty, they can only be the desires for food, sex, health, wealth, power, and the like. These must be our sole ideals, these the final aim and justification of our lives. But I say that to admit this is to destroy all value and to make life purposeless.

I am not trying to befog the issue by appealing to human vanities and prejudices. On the contrary, I am trying to make the issue clear. The unqualified acceptance of successful action as the sole criterion of truth will destroy, not only truth, but moral and aesthetic values as well. If reason, logic, and science lead to this conclusion, we must loyally accept it, even though it devastate our hopes and our ideals. We cannot support comfortable delusions. But even this very assertion proclaims belief in truth as an ideal, as an end in itself which is independent of mere success in action. Whether reason, logic, and science do in fact lead to this conclusion is, however, not yet clear, and is precisely the question to be examined. And therefore we must have the issue clear to start with. *Either there must be some other criterion of true knowledge besides that of success in action, or else we must submit to the destruction of all values and ideals* and admit that our life has no higher purpose than the satisfaction of our desires to go on living, to live softly, pleasantly, or powerfully. If value is destroyed there can, of course, be no higher or lower in anything in life. For all judgements of 'higher' and 'lower' are judgements of value. Man will be no higher than the brute. Beautiful art will be no higher than eating and drinking. Socrates will be no better than the pig. It is idle to reply that 'higher' and 'lower' can be

interpreted in terms of success in action, that the higher is the more successful, and so on. For to equate rightness with mere success is contrary to any genuine conception of rightness. And I fail to see how Socrates was more successful than the pig. The pig at least drinks no hemlock, is more successful in his efforts at survival than that!

Of course it may be possible to take up for the moment the position that the function of knowledge is success in action, but that action itself is or ought to be governed by some absolute end other than mere success or survival. We might try to adopt, for example, some realistic theory of goodness as an objective quality of the external world (or of the internal world) on a par with qualities of things such as redness, spatiality, or other such. But in the first place such a position would not be consistent. For our belief in the existence of objective qualities would itself be a piece of knowledge which would have to be explained as a function of practical activity. And secondly, such a position is obviously one in which philosophy could not rest. The inevitable outcome of taking successful activity as the sole criterion of truth is to make it also the sole criterion of morals. We may set up some such half-and-half philosophy as a temporary dam against the value-destroying flood. But the flood will carry it away.

It is conceivable that we might be compelled to admit that our values are delusions based upon our conceit, our false hopes, our vanity. If so, it would be unphilosophical any longer to uphold them. But it is equally unphilosophical not to be clear about the issues, not to realize all the logical implications of the theory which we are discussing. And the logical conclusion from that theory—be it true or false—is the destruction of all values. We must either give up our belief in value, or we must find some criterion of truth which is not wholly dependent upon practical activity. We cannot have it both ways. It is not any tenderness for delusive human hopes, but a simple regard for logical consistency and for a genuinely scientific view of the world which compels us to face the dilemma.

That truth is something to be sought for its own sake,

and not for its practical utility, is a belief which has been the spur of science and philosophy in the past. Great discoveries have for the most part been made in those civilizations in which the disinterested pursuit of truth, regardless of practical issues, has been an honoured ideal. And if this spirit should die, it is probable that science would die with it. In such civilizations as that of India knowledge for its own sake is not highly valued. Neither philosophical nor scientific problems are thought out for their own sakes *as* problems. Indians have never puzzled their heads, as the early Greeks did, about the motions of the heavenly bodies or their physical composition. Their only interest in the stars was *astrological*, i.e. they were only concerned to know whether the stars had any *practical* influence on life. If Europeans had been similarly practical-minded, astronomy would never have been born. It is the same in philosophy. The European is anxious to solve philosophical problems for their own sakes. Hence the wealth of European philosophical thought. The Indian only values philosophical knowledge if it can be put to practical use in freeing the soul from 'the wheel of things', in attaining Nirvana, union with Brahma, or some other such self-regarding end. And the result of this attitude is that science has never come into existence at all, and that philosophy, which has never separated itself properly from religion, has, after a brief early career, stagnated for centuries. And the people—in spite of Yoga philosophies and the like—have remained steeped in ignorance, error, and superstition.

These considerations show, at any rate, that belief in truth as one of the genuine values is deep-set in the human spirit. They show also that this belief has been of service to the human race, from which it would seem to follow that on pragmatic grounds it ought to be regarded as true! It *may*, nevertheless, be a delusion. But it is at least not a recommendation to a philosophy that it flies in the face of man's deepest ideals and aspirations. And when one remembers that the pragmatic view of knowledge has been belauded by some of its followers on the very ground that

it enables man to have faith, through the 'will to believe', in his own ideals, the ironical nature of the position becomes clear. We have been told that since truth is what works, we can repose faith in our religious and moral aspirations if we find that they assist us in life. The delusive character of this hope should now be clear. It proposes to support our values by first destroying them.

We had thought that in some way moral activity was good and right because it is rational, because reason validates it. But we cannot have it both ways. If practical action validates reason, as these philosophers would have us think, then reason cannot validate practical action. If rational knowledge has no validity except as a guide to successful action, then the validity of right action cannot be founded on reason. On the pragmatist view reason has for its end action. And action has for its end what? Nothing, so far as I can see, except the satisfaction of desire. And then value disappears.

The same point may be put otherwise. According to the pragmatist view, if it is followed to its logical conclusion, not only truth but all values are for the sake of action. What then is action for the sake of? The answer is an absolute blank. But the opposite view is possible, and does not leave us with a blank at the end of our inquiries. This view consists in asserting that instead of value being for the sake of action, action is, on the contrary, for the sake of value. Our lives are then no longer purposeless. Knowledge is not something that has no meaning and no value except in so far as it helps us to ward off dangers, to obtain food, to keep on living our useless lives. It is a real ideal to strive for. Art is not to be sought after merely because it satisfies some idle and transient desire which is of such a nature that we should be just as well off if (like the pig) we did not have the desire at all. Art too is something to live for. Moral goodness is not the mere success of the species in the wearisome and fatuous business of keeping alive, a means to an end which is in itself purposeless, but it is an aspiration to an end which is really and genuinely higher and

better than the lives we are leading. We live and strive for the absolute ends of truth, beauty, and goodness. We are not artists, saints, scientists, and philosophers merely in order to live. Much easier and probably pleasanter to live by being pork butchers. But we live, even the pork butchers among us, in the hope of becoming artists, saints, scientists, and philosophers. Such a view validates value, just as the pragmatist view destroys it.

If it is true, as I have urged elsewhere, that truth and reason lie at the heart of both beauty and moral goodness; and that truth is rational thinking, beauty rational feeling, and goodness rational action, then it is clear that in epistemology lies the whole crux of man's spiritual situation. We have to look to the theory of knowledge either to validate or to condemn not only truth-value, but moral and aesthetic values as well. And the question upon which this whole problem of man's spiritual life turns is this. Has rational knowledge, has truth, any justification apart from its use as a guide to successful action? If it has, then man's spiritual life is founded on a rock. If it has not, then all human ideals are vain.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that any future epistemology which fails to incorporate the thought that the development and structure of knowledge have been in some measure determined by biological needs, i.e. by the practical problem of living, must stand self-condemned. The pragmatic view rests upon a genuine insight, embodies a truth not again to be ignored with impunity. It is not therefore a simple question of finding arguments to dispute the pragmatic view in the interests of human values. The problem is rather to found an epistemology which reconciles the two sides of the dilemma, which gives due weight to the pragmatic element in knowledge without condemning knowledge to fatuity.

And we can see at once that the apparent contradiction is not absolute. Because knowledge has a biological value, it does not follow that it has no other value. Because its origin is in biological needs, it does not follow that it ends in them. It is an ancient and venerable insight that the

essence of a thing, and its value, are not to be determined by any considerations regarding its historical origin and development. The flower is something other than the mud and dung out of which it grows. And I trust that I shall not be mistaken for a supporter of sacraments and superstition if I remind the reader that even the theologian is logically entitled to urge that, even if his sacrament had its historical origin in crude magic and cannibalism, this does not necessarily condemn it as false. Morality may have come into being through the struggle for existence and the biological advantages of co-operative effort. But it does not follow that morality is nothing but intelligent selfishness. Selfishness may at first have dictated to us a policy of fair treatment to others as well as to ourselves. And we may *afterwards* have come to see that the unselfishness which was thereby engendered is good *in itself*, apart from the selfish motive which was its origin. We may well believe that out of the stress and struggle of living, out of the evolution of life, there have emerged values which transcend their lowly origins. This may be true both of knowledge and of the other values. And a detailed examination of the structure of knowledge may perhaps support this view.

It will be objected perhaps that in the foregoing discussion we have not allowed a sufficiently wide interpretation of the pragmatist point of view. In order to do it anything like justice, one must not attach too narrow a meaning to such words as 'action', 'useful', 'working', which so constantly appear in its vocabulary. One must not think that 'action' is confined to purely *practical* activities. Thinking itself, even when purely theoretical, is an action. The manipulation of the retort by the chemist, the adjustment of the telescope by the astronomer, even when they are directed to the making of discoveries apparently remote from the common affairs of life, are yet 'actions'. The 'useful' is not merely that which satisfies our lower physical or other desires, but rather that which is instrumental towards *any* desired end, including ideal

ends such as knowledge for its own sake. A mathematical device is 'useful' if it helps to solve the problem with which the mathematician is concerned, notwithstanding that this problem may have, or appear to have, no practical bearing of any kind. Similar remarks apply to the conception of what 'works'. Einstein's theory of relativity 'works' if it solves the problem which it is intended to solve. The proposition 'Queen Anne is dead' is true and 'works' because it fits in with the evidence, and to believe it does not bring about any untoward practical or theoretical consequences.

We must certainly bear in mind these admirable professions of intention. But the position appears to be as follows: (1) If the narrower interpretation is given to the terms which we have just been discussing, if knowledge is conceived as relative to *practical* activities, then pragmatism may remain self-consistent, but at the cost of destroying the concept of value. (2) If the more extended meanings suggested in the last paragraph are given to the pragmatist's stock words, then pragmatism becomes self-contradictory, and will be compelled to admit the reality of a truth which is independent of action and independent of any kind of usefulness.

The first of these two propositions has, I think, been made abundantly clear. And not very much argument is necessary for the demonstration of the second. For the protest against giving too narrow a meaning to the terms, and the movement towards widening the meaning, arise from the desire to do to the conception of knowledge as a value a lip service which is really inconsistent with the essentials of pragmatism. Pragmatist writers tell us that knowledge, like anything else, can be treated as an end in itself. But this needs analysis. Suppose that the proposition *P* is true. On pragmatist principles this can *only* mean that its truth consists in the fact that it constitutes a successful means to some end *other than its own truth*. True propositions cannot be defined as propositions which are successful in being means to truth. Such a definition is circular and self-contradictory. It makes truth dependent on truth. In effect it makes truth absolute and self-

dependent and independent of being a successful means to anything. It is therefore inconsistent with pragmatism. When it is said, therefore, that knowledge may be made an end in itself, all that the pragmatist can consistently mean by this assertion is that the knowledge of the proposition *P* may as a matter of psychological fact be treated by individual minds as an end in itself, but that its truth, whether it is so treated or not, still depends entirely upon its being useful as a means to some end *other* than itself. Truth is not true 'in itself'. It is only true as subserving some end other than truth, i.e. some end which is not theoretical but practical. So we come back to the same old position. If pragmatism defines truth in terms of purely practical ends, it destroys value. If it attempts to rise above this and to admit knowledge as a value, it is self-contradictory and destroys itself.

So we see pragmatism doing what we are all apt to do when we have been so unfortunate as to take up a false position. It attempts to maintain itself by twisting. It takes up first a position based on the concepts of practical activities, biological needs, &c. It soon begins to feel this position uncomfortable because it is dimly perceived to be inconsistent with any belief in value. It therefore tries to shift its position while nevertheless using the same words. It endeavours somehow to foist into its conceptions of the 'useful', of 'what works', and of what leads to successful 'action', the quite alien conceptions of the *theoretic* value of truth, of knowledge as an end in itself, and so on. Hence arises that loose, ambiguous, and elusive use of such words as 'useful' and 'works' which has always been characteristic of pragmatists. The ambiguity of language is used to conceal the essential inconsistency of thought. And if we try to tie down the meaning of the terms to anything definite, the pragmatist will at once complain that he is 'misunderstood', that our interpretation of his terms is too narrow, &c.

But we began by admitting that the pragmatic point of view contains a genuine insight. The insight is that the structure and even the validity of knowledge must have

been moulded in some way by practical needs in the course of the evolution of the species. We have to work out a *sane* theory of truth, a theory which includes this insight while at the same time avoiding the errors of pragmatism. It is time that the less irresponsible elements in the philosophical world began to seek out a satisfactory theory, a theory which must be characterized by judgement and balance, and not by paradox and cheap cleverness.