

THE USELESS VIRTUES

BY RALPH BARTON PERRY

IF all the good advice that has ever been given were to be brought together and compared, it would probably be discovered that every piece could be matched with a contrary piece given by somebody else. The world's practical wisdom does not form a consistent system. No one man could possibly believe all of it at the same time. For example, there is equally good authority for believing that woman is the tyrant of man, and for believing that she is his puppet. Victor Hugo tells us that 'men are women's playthings; woman is the devil's'; while another Frenchman, Michelet, tells us that 'nearly every folly committed by woman is born of the stupidity or evil influence of man.' But it may be argued that in this case it is the very paradox itself which is proverbial. Take the less familiar example of self-consciousness. There are the moralists whose primary maxim is the Delphic oracle, 'Know thyself.' 'We should every night call ourselves to an account,' says Seneca. 'What infirmity have I mastered today? What passion opposed? What temptation resisted? What virtue acquired? Our vices will abate of themselves if they be brought every day to the shrift.' This is accounted wise, and carries conviction to conscience. But so does the contrary preaching of Carlyle, with his tirade against the 'unhealthy state of self-sentience, self-survey, precursor and prognostic of still worse health.'

It is horrible to contemplate the volume of discordant advice that is poured from pulpits, platforms, and editorial columns into the ears of that hapless reprobate, the plain man. It is perhaps fortunate that so little of it is followed. For it is always one-sided. It is characteristic of most advice and exhortation that it is only a part of the truth. It is an exaggeration of that particular half-truth which the exhorter thinks is timely, and which he believes is going to be offset by contrary influences. It is a push against some existing over-tendency, an attempt to stem some tide that is running too high, and in the hope of securing that balance and moderation in which right conduct always consists.

This is my apology for appearing with an exhortation which on the face of it may appear to be strained or even absurd. For I propose, in a sense, to preach *against efficiency or success*. I do so not because I do not see their importance, but because I suspect that my reader will already know their importance well enough, and possibly even too well. Or if he does not, there are many who can proclaim that importance more eloquently than I. There is something abroad, an irresistible social impulse, which is tending to promote the useful virtues, to encourage thrift, initiative, industry, coöperation, civic pride, and all those qualities of mind and will that make communities sound and prosperous. But were I to join the general praise of efficiency and utility, I should be seeing only

half the truth. And I know that if I were to follow the line of less resistance and urge what everybody already wants, I should be forfeiting the greater opportunity of speaking a word for that half-truth which has difficulty in getting a hearing and needs the strong support of every teacher or preacher. I want therefore to make out as strong a case as I can for what may in a sense be called *the useless virtues*, for those qualities of mind and will which cannot be measured by the standard of efficiency, but whose very value is inseparable from the fact that they do not immediately contribute to practical success.

II

First of all it is necessary that we should reflect upon the meaning of a word that is perpetually in our mouths, the word 'practical.' It is not customary for us to reflect upon its meaning at all. It is supposed to express a finality. To call a thing practical is to praise it; to call it unpractical is to condemn it. It never occurs to us as a rule that practicality is a special kind of value. If that did occur to us, then of course we should be in the position of admitting that there is at least one other kind of value from which it may be distinguished. And this would be equivalent to admitting that when we call a thing practical or unpractical we have not, as is usually assumed, provided sufficient grounds for approving or rejecting it.

Let me select a homely example which will bring out what appears to me to be the meaning of practicality. Suppose a man to be driven to the roof of a burning building, while a crowd is gathered below to offer help or suggestions. Jones shouts, 'Get a ladder!' or indicates where one may be had, or gets one himself. Brown points out an adjacent roof by which

the refugee may pass to a place of safety. Several Smiths fetch a blanket and hold it to break his fall. Socrates who has happened by, and who appears to be less agitated than the rest, remarks (largely to himself, for he can find few to listen to him), 'I wonder what the man really wants. He appears to be desperately anxious to save his life. But is his life after all so prodigiously important as to warrant all this excitement? Has he good reasons for wishing to save himself? And what a poorly organized community this is, that such a thing should be allowed to occur! Why are buildings not fire-proof? What carelessness can have started the fire?' But before Socrates can proceed further with his ruminations he is roughly brushed aside. If he receives any consideration at all he will be regarded as a poor lunatic, or philosopher, or college professor.

Now which among these men is the practical man, and which the unpractical? I do not suppose that there can be the slightest doubt in any one's mind. The Joneses, the Browns, and the Smiths are the practical men, and Socrates (there is rarely even one such in any crowd) is theoretical, academic, a creature of mere intellect; harmless enough if he will only stay at home and write books which nobody reads, but very much in the way when there is something to be done.

But what is the precise difference between the Joneses, the Browns, and the Smiths on the one hand, and Socrates on the other? It appears to me that it comes down to this. The practical men accept circumstances as they find them; they take it for granted that the man wants to escape from the roof, and they regard the fire as an existing fact, which is not, for the moment at least, to be explained, but to be acted on. They do not go behind this concrete and present situation, except so far as

to assume on the victim's part the normal instinct of self-preservation. Taking these things for granted, without consciously reflecting upon them at all, they can devote all their faculties and energies to contriving a remedy. In so far as their minds are engaged at all they will be bent upon finding the means that will fit the situation. In this way the problem is enormously simplified, and there is strong likelihood of a prompt and effectual solution. If the crowd were made up entirely of Socrateses pondering all the whys and wherefores, life would be lost before any conclusions whatsoever would have been reached. To be practical, in short, is to confine one's attention to the effectual meeting of existing emergencies.

President Cleveland invented a phrase which is an almost perfect expression of the attitude of practicality. There is nothing profound about it, nor does it possess any striking literary merit; but it never fails to appeal, and has become a part of our common speech, so thoroughly does it coincide with the bias of common sense. He once remarked, as every one knows, 'It is a condition, and not a theory, that confronts us.' I do not remember what condition it was that confronted us; but the practical man is always confronted by a condition. I shall suggest presently that every condition does in truth involve a theory; but if so, the practical man ignores it. His practicality lies in confining himself to finding an act which will meet the condition. He has a family which must be supported, or an industrial plant which must be made to pay, or an examination which must be passed, or a game which must be won, or an office to which he proposes to be elected. His problem is the comparatively narrow and simple problem of finding the instrument to fit the occasion and achieve the result.

As a nation, we are commonly accused by unsympathetic Europeans of being excessively practical. We are supposed to specialize in practicality. Thus, when England wants a railroad system reorganized she looks to America for a manager; and when Germany wants to make a better record in the Olympic games she sends to America for a trainer. There is less demand in Europe for American poets and musical composers, and, I regret to say, for American philosophers. Now we may believe that this reputation is not deserved, or we may glory in it. But in either case we can afford at least to see just what it means. Consider for a moment the verdict of one of our harshest critics, Mr. Lowes Dickinson of Cambridge University. 'I am inclined to think,' he says, 'that the real end which Americans set before themselves is Acceleration. To be always moving, and always moving faster, that they think is the beatific life; and with their happy detachment from philosophy and speculation, they are not troubled by the question, Whither? If they are asked by Europeans, as they sometimes are, what is the point of going so fast? their only feeling is one of genuine astonishment. Why, they reply, you go fast! And what more can be said?'

Now no doubt this is a libel upon the American people, and might justly be resented. Or it might perhaps be proved that Mr. Dickinson's fellow countrymen are just as guilty in intent as we are; that they want to move fast, but, failing to do it, try to make out that the game is n't worth the candle, and that their rival's victory is hollow and fruitless, as a man who saw that he was losing a race might withdraw and try to persuade the spectators that it was a very childish and undignified proceeding anyhow. There would doubtless be a dash of truth in such a

retort, just enough to enable you to get the laugh on the other fellow. But it would be a shrewder thing to detect the truth in the criticism, learn one's fault, correct it, and leave the critic himself to stagnate in his own complacency.

Now Mr. Dickinson's criticism brings out cleverly enough the meaning of that practicality on which we pride ourselves, and which we hastily assume to be an absolute standard. Practicality means skill, energy, speed, quantity of performance, without reference to the profitableness of the result. Not that the result may not in point of fact be profitable — but the question is not raised. The profitableness of the result is assumed from the fact that everybody is mad about it. As the popular song puts it, 'everybody's doing it.' Whatever everybody is doing recommends itself without further justification. Whatever everybody's doing is 'the thing to do.' A man is willing to wear anything apparently, if his tailor says 'they're wearing them that way.' So we eagerly adopt the pursuits that we find in vogue; and apply ourselves to making a good showing.

Most people, perhaps, appear to be dividing their energies between three pursuits: making money, dancing, and playing baseball, or watching some one else play it. To make as much money as possible, to dance as well or as often as possible, and to defeat your opponent in sport, either personally or vicariously through a favorite team, — these tasks absorb the energies of the typical practical man. He does not adopt and follow a plan of life by conscious reflection, but he is constantly in a current of life, which flows now this way and now that, and sweeps him along with it. Or the practical man is like a man who finds himself in a great throng of athletes who are matching

their skill and speed and prowess against one another. He goes in for this or that, spurred by emulation, and seeks to outstrip his competitors in some race without concerning himself with the direction of the course, and the place in which he will find himself at the end of the race.

There is a false proverb which teaches us that whatever is worth doing is worth doing well. I call it false because it is so evident that there are some things which are only worth doing provided one is willing to do them ill. It is a part of practical wisdom to know what it is worth while to exert one's self about, and what may be done in a spirit of playful carelessness. But there is a more popular maxim which is so widely observed that it is never formulated — the maxim that whatever is done well is worth doing. This, I take it, is the maxim of the practical man. Do what the next man is doing, but go him one better. Make a record. There is a whole code of life in this passion for records. To make or hold a record means to excel everybody else in a precisely measurable degree. To excel everybody else in an activity in which everybody else would like to excel, *to hold the most coveted record*, this would represent the supreme practical success.

III

We should now be sufficiently clear in our minds as to what practicality means. But it is evident that our critics in judging us to be a peculiarly practical people mean to accuse us of a fault; and we shall not have understood the criticism until we have come to see wherein the fault lies. It is evident that Mr. Dickinson, for example, means to convey the idea that this question, *Whither?* which is said to trouble us so little, is an important question; and that we are making a serious mistake

in ignoring it. He would mean, I think, to go further, and assert that this question, Whither? is the *most* important question. When we examine the matter more narrowly, it appears to come to this.

The very same instance of successful effort may be glorious or ridiculous, according as the result is itself worth while or not. I remember an adventure of my own that is in point. I left Cambridge with a friend to catch a six o'clock boat for Portland, Maine. We had been delayed in starting and upon consulting our watches in the car we found that unless we adopted extraordinary measures we should miss the boat. So we leaped from the car and hailed a passing cab. We bribed the driver to whip his horse into a gallop. As we approached the dock we saw the boat moving. Jumping from the cab with bags in hand, we ran down the dock and leaped aboard, flushed with our triumph. We had exerted ourselves desperately; we had been quick-witted and skillful; and I suspect that we had created a record. We had certainly succeeded. But when our excitement and breathlessness subsided we discovered that the boat *was just arriving*; and that it would not depart for several hours. Then something very extraordinary happened to our triumph. It suddenly collapsed and shriveled into a sorry joke. We felt ashamed and ridiculous, and sought to hide our diminished heads in the impersonal throng of bystanders.

I wonder if there is any better definition of that most hateful of predicaments, which we describe as 'having made a fool of one's self,' than to say that it is *to have exerted one's self for an end that turns out to be worthless in the attainment*. Suppose a man to have devoted himself passionately to the accumulation of riches, to have spent himself, literally, in getting them, and to

have prided himself on his skill and efficiency, only to find that the riches do not amount to anything when he has them; so that although he has been so extraordinarily busy in doing, he has in reality done nothing. Such a man might well feel in the flat and empty years of his ebbing life that he had played the fool; and that he might better have been less busy, if only he might then have taken a little time to think ahead and select some worthy goal before throwing himself headlong into the pursuit.

A moment's thought about the ends themselves, looking before you leap, curiously inquiring into the itinerary before joining the procession, a little cool philosophy before the heat of action, *disinterested reflection*, these are what I mean by the useless virtues — the unpractical wisdom of Socrates. Surely such wisdom has its place. You cannot make life up out of it altogether. Socrates in his most Socratic moods will not make an effective member of the fire brigade. There are times for action, and when they come the man of the hour is he who has no doubts, but only instincts and habits. Our instincts and habits, however, take care of themselves better than does our cool reflection. The mood of practicality is the vulgar mood; not in the sense of being debased, but in the sense of being usual or typical. For the individual it is the line of less resistance. Being usual, it sets the standards by which a man is judged by the crowd. It is favored by that popular prejudice called common sense. It requires no exhortation of mine in order to get a hearing. Therefore I urge, doubtless with some exaggeration, the value of the rarer but not less indispensable mood.

It would seem that practical efficiency and disinterested reflection might then divide life between them, each having its appropriate season, and

each requiring in society at large its special organs and devotees. But since we are for the moment the partisans of disinterested reflection, let us recognize a certain advantage that it has over its rival — the advantage, namely, of magnanimity. I mean that while disinterested reflection acknowledges the merit of its rival, practical efficiency in its haste and narrow bent is likely to be blind and intolerant. If I were asked, 'What, in the name of common sense, is philosophy?' I should be unable to answer. There is no answer. For amongst the categories of common sense there is no provision for philosophy. With a person wholly dominated by common sense, caught and swept along in the tide of practical endeavor, or wholly dominated by social habit, the philosophical part is in disuse and may be atrophied altogether. But if I ask, 'What, in the name of philosophy, is common sense?' I can find an answer — just such an answer perhaps as we are now giving. In short, disinterested reflection is more inclusive, and more circumspect, than practicality.

But I have not even yet exhausted the peculiar merits of the unpractical value of disinterested reflection. I have spoken of its importance as testing the value of ends, and so confirming or discrediting our more impetuous practical endeavor. But there is another point. I refer to the advantage of unapplied knowledge as giving man resourcefulness and adaptability, a capacity to meet novel situations. Let me attempt to make my meaning clear.

We praise science in these days, and most of us prefer it to poetry or philosophy, because we can see the *use of it*. It is characteristic of our practical standards that we regard such men as Watts, Bell, Morse, and Edison as typifying the value of science. The inventor, the engineer, is the man of solid achievement. Why? Because, again, he

supplies that for which the need is already felt. We want light, communication, and transportation, and such men as these give us what we want. Therefore we are grateful. Similarly, the man who discovers a cure for cancer will be a hero among men. There is a powerful demand, an eager longing for that which he will have to give, and his reward will be ready for him when he comes. Now we need not disparage his glory. But this is perfectly certain: when the discovery is made, it will be due to the store of physical, chemical, physiological, and anatomical truth which has been accumulated by men who were animated mainly by theoretical motives. These investigators have devoted themselves to winning knowledge for which there was at the time no practical demand. This means that they had to be sustained by something else than the popular applause which greets the man with the remedy. Such men are sustained no doubt by the encouragement of their fellow investigators, or by the patronage of the state. But they rely more than the inventor or engineer upon the inward support of their own love of truth, and upon a certain just pride of the intellect, such as Kepler felt when he wrote in the Preface to his *Weltharmonik*: 'Here I cast the die, and write a book to be read, whether by contemporaries or by posterity, I care not; it can wait for readers thousands of years, seeing that God himself waited six thousand years for some one to contemplate his work.'

But I had not meant to be sentimental about it, or to claim a greater heroism for the detached investigator. Indeed there is a sense in which his conduct is less praiseworthy, in so far as it is often self-regarding or unsocial, lacking in that motive of service which we rightly require of perfect conduct. It is sufficient that we should see that

what he does is indispensable. It is through his efforts that man is put into possession of a stock of free and unappropriated ideas with which to meet unexpected and unpredictable emergencies, or on which to construct new hypotheses. It is this possession of an ample margin of knowledge over the recognized practical necessities, of *intellectual capital*, so to speak, that is the condition of progress. It is this which more than anything else marks the difference between man and the brute, or between progressive societies and those static, barbarian societies in which human energy is exhausted by the effort to preserve existence with no hope of betterment.

IV

It is now evident enough that what I have called useless virtues, or unpractical values, are not divorced from life in any absolute or ultimate sense. We may as well declare once and for all that there is no virtue or value whatsoever that is divorced from life in such a sense. That it is impossible that knowledge should be absolutely useless is self-evident. For to know at all is to know the world we live in; and to know it is to bring it within the range of action, pave the way to the control of it.

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The better we know our world the more effectually we can live in it. This holds unqualifiedly. But there is a very great difference between what we might more correctly call *long-range* and *short-range* practicality.

What we usually speak of as practical would correspond to what I here speak of as short-range practicality. It means a readiness to meet the immediate occasion as is dictated by the momentary desire. Such practicality is a perpetual meeting of emergencies. It is a sort of living from hand to mouth, an uninspired and unillumined opportunism. That which is ordinarily, or from this standpoint, condemned as unpractical, and which *is* unpractical from this *narrow* standpoint, may now be called long-range practicality. That is to say, it is that prevision, that thorough intellectual equipment, that wisdom as to the ultimate and comparative worth of things, without which there can be no security nor any confirming sense of genuine achievement. It is that which makes the difference between making a fool of one's self, however earnestly or even successfully, and living in a manner which would be able to endure the test of time, and would not appear ridiculous in the eyes of one who was a witness of eternity.

THE FLAVOR OF THINGS

BY ROBERT M. GAY

'Life is sweet, brother.' — MR. PETULENGRO.

THERE can be no doubt that for some people mathematics has flavor, even though for me it is as the apples of Sodom. I have known people who seemed to be in love with the triangles. Permutations and combinations and the doctrine of chances filled their souls with elation; they would rather wander over the area of a parallelogram than over the greenest meadow under heaven, collecting angles and sides as another would daisies and buttercups, and chasing the unknown quantity as another might a butterfly.

I envy these people this faculty which I can never hope to acquire. I used to try to work up a factitious enthusiasm for geometry by naming angle A Abraham, B Benjamin, C Cornelius, and so on; side AB then became Abrajamin, side BC Benjanelius, side AC Abranelius, and the perimeter Abrajaminelius, — the last a name of Miltonic sonorousness, mouth-filling, and perfectly pronounceable if one scanned it as catalectic trochaic tetrameter.

Although I never had the courage to introduce them to my teachers, I regarded the Abrajaminelian family with some affection until one day I tried to name the perimeter of a dodecagon, when I came to the conclusion that it would require less time to learn the proposition by heart than to learn the name; and from that day I gave up all attempt to infuse an adventitious interest into Legendre, and simply memorized him.

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I have heard geometry described as a 'beautiful science,' but —

If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?

To me she was an obstacle in the path of knowledge; invisible, not hostile, but palpable and stubborn as the Boyg that gave Peer Gynt so much trouble. I tried in vain to squirm and wriggle past her. There is a possibility that I should still be blindly bumping that obstruction halfway up the Mathematical Mountains if my professor of solid geometry had not opportunely departed from college leaving no class-records behind him. I passed — by an intervention of Providence — and my days of pure mathematics were over; but I felt no undue elation, for applied mathematics remained. If I had impressed my instructors before as half-witted, here I was wholly witless. One cannot apply what one does not possess.

From a child I had had an obscure distrust of mechanism of all kinds. The people of Erewhon, you remember, feared it because they thought it had a soul: I feared it because it seemed to me to have none, until I discovered that its soul was mathematical, a new ground for trepidation. Even yet I cannot feel warmly toward a machine. I can gape with wonder as well as anybody as I watch the white paper fed in at one end of a press in, say, the Herald Building, and the Sunday Illustrated Supplement taken out at the other; but my wonder is only polite, merely intellectual; there is no heart