

*Practical or Ideal?*



*J. M. Taylor*

BD  
435  
.T2



Class BA435

Book .J2

Copyright N<sup>o</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.









PRACTICAL OR IDEAL ?



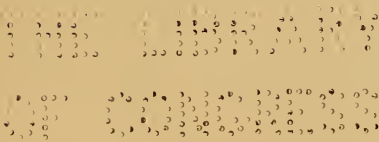


# PRACTICAL OR IDEAL?

BY

JAMES M. TAYLOR, D.D., LL.D.

PRESIDENT OF VASSAR COLLEGE



NEW YORK  
THOMAS Y. CROWELL & CO.  
PUBLISHERS

BD435  
T2

THE LIBRARY OF  
CONGRESS,  
TWO COPIES RECEIVED  
JUL. 11 1901  
COPYRIGHT ENTRY  
*July 11, 1901*  
CLASS a XXa. No.  
*12945*  
COPY B.

COPYRIGHT, 1901,  
By T. Y. CROWELL & CO.

## PRACTICAL OR IDEAL?

IT was a young mining engineer and student of science, as well as of philosophy, who asked, a century ago, "Which is the more practical, philosophy or economy?" "Philosophy," he said, "can bake no bread, but she can procure for us God, freedom, immortality. Which, then, is the more practical?" This question of the German Novalis points a moral for our time, and bids our pragmatic generation ask the nature of the practical, of which we talk so much. We are hearing continually talk of practical men, practical politics, practical education, and these are supposed to contrast favorably with men who see visions, with education which ends in books and thought, with politics which emphasize purity and the service of the whole people. "Baking bread" is something *practical*, getting votes is something tangible, the education which enables one to run an engine or teach a school is worth while,—but God, freedom, immor-

tality, these are for those whose heads are in the clouds, for the few who may dream, and not for the masses of men who must work.

There may come an occasional doubt, indeed, to the most practical man, as to the sufficiency of this view of life, and education, and politics. When a close student of biology shuts himself for months in the humble little laboratory that they show you in Paris, and comes out with a discovery that saves for France more than all her huge debt of war has cost her, men glorify the name of Pasteur and forget the long years of "impractical" education, and the infatuation of the student's ideal which led up to the great discovery. When the scientist sits pondering his problems and working out the abstrusest calculations in mathematics, he is a dreamer, but when his dream is realized in the harnessing of electricity, and men reckon by ampères, in terms of his own name, dreams are seen to be practical and vision is found to have substance, and the highest problems of abstruse science are seen to have as close relation to real life as the very bread we eat. "Practical men" may well ask, then, whether bread, necessary though it is, is any more than the *sustenance* of life, and whether life itself, for *every* man and in every pursuit,

is not more than meat, and does not rather consist in God, freedom, immortality.

But can we really divorce the practical and ideal? Can we have an education, for example, that is solely "practical" and have it touch the highest issues of life? Let us admit that it must be practical, that the education which does not train men to be more efficient lacks and is mistaken, that the world has a right to look for better results from the young of this generation, with their unequalled opportunities, than it could demand from the fathers, that education is a failure unless it knits together into order and willing response to the mind all the energies of body and soul, and that general abilities being equal the educated man ought to be a better instrument than any other in factory, counting-room, or profession, more master of himself and of his world. Let us by all means emphasize the practical, — but let us know what it means. We refuse to recognize as the only practical education that which enables a boy to run a donkey-engine, and to exclude the quiet study and reflection which may result in the solution of the problems of a Röntgen and a Helmholtz, or to say that the hard-headed, successful business man is practical and to call that

impractical which holds men to faith in the larger and deeper life. However practical we may deem it, that life loses itself which fails to keep in touch with the invisible, — with the deeper principles which make business more than barter, and science more than hammering rocks and a skilled use of the scalpel, and life more than the baking and eating of bread. Surely that is not success which loses that which most sweetens and broadens and elevates our lives. No education, then, is practical which does not train us to be better, more forceful, more useful, but *also*, no education is practical which does not give an outlook beyond the actual and tangible and visible, and which fails to inspire the soul with a vision in seeking which it shall be ever impelled toward “a higher than its highest and a better than its best.” It is a failure if it help us only to bake bread, and does not open eyes and heart to unseen things which are eternal. The “practical,” indeed, destroys itself and its own special ends, unless it discovers at the heart of its activities more than can be touched or seen or measured.

It is the purpose of this little essay to bring out the truth in that statement, and by illustration to show fully that there is really *no practi-*

*cal* which is *not also ideal*,—and that nothing ministers to life in any proper sense unless it touches something deeper than what we generally mean by the actual and useful.

Take, for example, any fine musical composition,—say the Ninth Symphony. Can we discover its secret by an analysis of its parts, by reducing it to its several notes, by pursuing the waves of sound to the ear, and then through its intricate mechanism along the nerves to the brain centres? What have we gained? *Facts, facts, facts*. But of what value are facts? Of none whatever, unless we learn something from them, unless they are significant, and not merely facts. Now in this case we may have gained some knowledge of the philosophy of sound, of its external and physiological conditions, but what have we done for the Ninth Symphony? Destroyed it, for us. The ideal element is its soul, and we have missed it, and for lack of the transcendent, which is vision, the glory of the music is lost to us.

So it is with a picture. We need not illustrate by a great creation, but take any good landscape in our rooms, or any figure which continues to hold us and interest us. Why do we care for it? Because it represents *facts*? It

may show a hill and plain, a far-reaching road, a man or woman, a flock of sheep,—but that is not all. The vision of the painter, the thought he has, carries us beyond the facts and gives us a glimpse of a glory that is not on sea or land. It is the weakness of the so-called realistic school to fail to grasp this, and it is a *practical art* which gives us plain facts, and which degenerates so often into banality and indecency. The obscuration of the ideal is here the ruin of the practical.

What is literature without this ideal element? In the historic development of literature creative epochs yield to the critical, but even then vision may be kept. Very often, however, the critical ages are followed by times in which realism dominates authorship, and literature becomes the mere portrayal of certain lines of *fact*, or a wearisome playing on the same chords of sensibility. It is supposed to come nearer to *real* life. So we get, at length, a fiction which finds its material in the baser and worse elements of life, “worldly, sensual, devilish,”—abnormal, pathological, exaggerating certain weaknesses and passions of men till they are made to seem all life,—unsettling the real values and inviting susceptible minds to sights and discussions fitter,



often, for the dissecting room of a hospital than for the pabulum of a fresh clean soul. This is not the literature which lasts: it debases, drags down, contaminates, defiles,—but it is too “real,” too “practical” to last. The world’s books are those which appeal to the ideals of men and which glorify the common with the magic touch of the unseen.

The illustration is equally clear in science, whose mission is so commonly thought to be with mere facts. When Romanes, in his early life, reasoned himself into agnosticism, he found the world another thing, he tells us, loveless, because Godless. As Jean Paul put it long before, God had become a force, æther a gas, the world a world machine, the second life a coffin. The true glory of science is not to gather *facts*, though many of its disciples would turn it into a Gradgrind,—as if this universe were a mere rectangle. It is the high mission of science to interpret fact, to reveal thought, to show the relations which give us a cosmos instead of a chaos. The positivism of Comte, with its contempt for theology and metaphysics, was as false to science as to philosophy, because it failed to grasp the truth that there can be no science where there is not the transcending of the actual in theory,

outlook, and aim. It is just here that mysticism will always have power over men, because it expresses the soul's feeling that there must be deeper mysteries than eye can see, ear can hear, or human plummet sound. It makes us akin to poet and prophet, and gives us communion with those who have been the real seers,—*se-ers*,—of the race.

How different is the teacher's work, too, if viewed from the "practical" aspect, as distinguished from that ideal view of his work and duty which includes the really practical. There are always too many teachers whose view of their responsibility is limited to an effort to cram so much knowledge into the head of a given pupil. No wonder that it seems to so many a dull profession! The pupil is often dull, the lesson dull, the effort to do the same task over and over exceeding dull, if there be no vision beyond class room and text-book, and that single day in the life of a boy. Probably there is no explanation that accounts for the very large amount of poor teaching in our schools and colleges so fruitful as the lack of vision on the part of the teachers. No true teacher's sight is bounded by class room and lesson and pupil. That class room is a source of influence for life,

that lesson is one step in the building of mind and character, that pupil is to grow and carry the influence of that hour into the world's great life. No one with a soul looks at *The Angelus* and sees there only peasants at eventide. It is not admired and sung for that. So schoolroom and pupil and teacher, regarded as simple facts, estimated in what we call a "plain, practical way," are not objects to awaken enthusiasm, but to the soul that sees, there is nothing beside the home and church that means so much to all life as that room and teacher and boy or girl.

Englishmen often used to say of Thomas Arnold, that great teacher of teachers as well as of boys, that it was a shame to waste such a man, scholar, theologian, statesman, in teaching Latin syntax to boys. Nothing, in itself, could seem duller, more useless, less practical, and if a boy is just a boy, and Latin syntax is an end, Arnold's critics were quite right. But Thomas Arnold knew that syntax was an instrument, that a class room was a throne of influence and inspiration, that his boys were to touch the life of an Empire, and nothing he could have done in Church or State would have ministered to his generation as did his teaching in that plain class room in Rugby.

Another illustration is found in our common talk of "practical politics." That means political work and planning that will secure immediate results for those who are working, — the management of men and means so that party success shall be assured, or some particular scheme realized. It is distinguished from ideal politics which are supposed to deal with men as they are not and with conditions which never exist. Naturally the latter means failure, but does the former mean success? Is it a mistake that "practical politics" means in common parlance a politics divorced from righteousness, unhampered by strict moral law, and adapted only to selfish ambitions and partisan ends?

This popular judgment is well founded because based on results as well as on long-continued observation of tendencies. This mistake in ideal politics, so called, is in holding in view *only* conditions and means which do not exist; the mistake in practical politics, so called, is in the thought only of those which do exist. The truly practical here, as in education, science, art, is that which sees the ideal through the practical, and knows that the unseen is the eternal element here as elsewhere. The average political boss is the man, for example, who can

manipulate men, and who uses offices, or other bribes, as means of holding them to his purposes, and whose view is confined to party ends, unembarrassed by any care for such ideal conceptions as the nation, or the whole body of the people. He may chance to be an able man in some specific line of statesmanship, though that has not generally been true of such leaders among us, as was Walpole, for example, in England, — but he seems pitifully small and insignificant when contrasted with the real leader of men, the statesman with ideals who can lift men to their level, and who can inspire a people's courage and hope and effort, like Chatham or the younger Pitt. The "practical politician" among us is the man who takes things as they are and keeps them as they are, and our hope must always be in those who can see beyond party success or the carrying of an election, and who believe in striving to realize the things which are out of sight. Judging by centuries instead of years the practical, here as elsewhere, is one with the ideal.

But why need we go beyond our common every-day life for our illustration? The thoroughly "practical" mind tends to see in life a

routine of common toil, and viewed externally it is uninspiring enough.

“The homely nurse doth all she can  
To make her foster child, her inmate man,  
Forget the glories he hath known.”

The philosophy of “the man with a hoe” might have a far larger application in this aspect. The weeding of a garden, the ploughing of a field, the sweeping of a room, the cooking of a dinner, the sewing of a garment, the selling of goods, are in themselves dreary enough if one cannot see beyond them, and it is just this power of vision, this infusion of the ideal, which exalts so many “common” lives and makes their sphere of toil holier than most temples. I have the vision of a man, now, ill among ordinary surroundings, without a touch of poetry in his circumstances, making his sick-room a place of sacred pilgrimage because the spirit in him was so sweet and pure, and clothed all his common conditions of life with a reflection of the glory of the world he saw by faith. That is just the power the ideal has to transmute the real, and it is this which makes philosophy, which gives God, freedom, immortality, more practical than baking bread. The thought that can make “the meanest work divine,” the vision that can relate

every little duty to the great plan of God, the faith that can catch what the centuries are saying amid the wild chorus of the hours (to adopt a word of Emerson) is worthier of esteem and cultivation than any skill of hand or eye, and indeed gives to all deftness and all labor point and charm and prospect.

A final illustration may be drawn from religion. This is, indeed, the very sphere of the ideal, and yet religious life, so called, is often visionless and consists in a close-bound round of dogma, tradition, ritual, habitual service, dead and formal. That is the sure end of it all if religious services be made ends in themselves and the pragmatic spirit be suffered to control the life. But how different if the Life be all in all and our lives the expressions of His own, — so that in joy we know a higher pleasure, and in sorrow feel the law of life which back of all is love, and know the hand which guides even in the valley of the shadow, whose being is an ocean to our little sea, an ocean of which we shall know more and ever more.

Then our dogmas are but our efforts to conceive of Him; our prayers — they are but the climbing of our spirits toward Him; our good deeds — they are but the weak efforts of our

love to answer Him; this veil of sense, beyond which we sometimes gain glimpses, this is but the shadow of Himself, and we shall see Him as He is, and be like Him. What a different thing is "life, death, and the vast forever," if it be thus but the half revelation and half concealing of a Father and a Friend! It is in the power of this vision, not because of rite and ceremony and religious facts, that men have endured, as seeing Him who is invisible.

Near the Hot Springs of North Carolina there is a section called "the Shut-in Country." As one rides his horse up the mountain roads, and pushes through the beautiful streams, he passes here and there a single-room cabin. In the distance he may have seen a woman in the door, but she has turned her back and walked away. The eager curiosity of a New England home is wanting, and the people have turned in upon themselves in thought and speech. They tell you in the mission schools that the first task is to awaken interest in something beyond themselves and their immediate neighbors, to stimulate curiosity, to lift them beyond their "real" and "practical." Vision, aspiration, is the first essential. So do many who are more favored lose the best of life, because they see only facts



and do not see through them to their relations and meaning. They are dwellers in a shut-in country. The mountains are but mountains to them, and yet they might tell of the Everlasting; the stones might preach their sermons, but they are only stones; they might read the books of the running brooks, but the brooks are just running streams for them; the practical is not transfigured by the ideal, and the beauty and power and peace of life are largely lost for the want of vision.

Why is this so? Why is the real thing, the single fact, the separate life, unreal, untrue, insufficient? Why must the practical be moved by the ideal or lose its practical character altogether?

Because the ideal universalizes the real. That is only saying, in somewhat philosophical phrase, that the individual fact or thing is made significant and is brought into the relations that give it worth only by that which relates it to other facts and things, and makes it part of the great whole. Nothing is complete in itself. What would the life of any individual mean if it were absolutely the only life? It is significant because of many lives and common interests and relations that reach on and on and have no lim-

its, — as the wavelets keep circling out when a stone is thrown into the lake. We cannot think that what we see is all that is seen, and that what engrosses us is all life. Insight, vision, the ideal, is the suggestion of the relation of our interests and of what we see to the whole of life and thought and sight and purpose. Without it there could be nothing greater than the individual and his interests, no cosmos, no universe, no “all in all.”

Suppose we try to forget that and lose sight of it for a moment. Our act is now just our own, our thought *our* thought, with no relation to any other interest or any other’s act or thought. Then what meaning is left to our action or thinking, or even to ourselves, if there is no other individual, and no wider universe than that act of ours? If we could think of an unrelated atom, and we cannot, just because this is a universe, what could it mean? It is impossible, indeed, for us to rest a moment in the conviction that our acts can be unrelated and our thoughts unbound to a something more permanent than they. Indeed, that would be to think chaos, and our minds are so constituted that they cannot imagine or accept a world which has not in it an informing principle of law

and order, — cosmic, not chaotic. One law, one order, relates all details, binds into unity atoms, individuals, worlds, — and gives us a universe, permanent, abiding, in which the many single thoughts, acts, purposes, lives, events, gain their significance. The ideal shows us that, takes our single thought or purpose, and binds it to the soul of things, and we know that what is true for us singly is true for the whole, even to its remotest bounds, and what is really beautiful and abidingly good is beautiful everywhere and good to the end of time.

When the light from the sun or from some distant star flashes into the spectrum the message that sodium is one of its constituents, we know that sodium here and sodium in Arcturus are identical. When we talk of righteousness, truth, faith, love, we cannot think a universe in which they shall mean one thing here and another there; the same light in the spiritual spectrum flashes here and beyond the stars.

The vision of the soul, the ideal, is our vehicle of this great truth, relating the individual event and life to the sum of things, carrying us beyond the transient to the permanent, beneath the surface to the soul of things.

“ That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
And decomposes but to recompose,  
Becomes my universe that feels and knows.”

That is the truth we have been illustrating throughout this essay, — in literature, in art, in music, in science, in education, in all life, — that vision relates the little to the great, and the transient to the eternal. Our single effort is part of a whole ; that dignifies it; our common duties have eternal meaning and worth. There is no death where there is such a vision. That the ideal does for life. But not to see that, to know only the unrelated selfish deed or thought, may be in common phrase to “see things as they are,” but it is *death*. In fact, it is not to see things as they are, for in God’s universe there is no truth and no good and no real sight where the soul is not moved by this deeper vision of the ideal.

But why? again. There must be some fuller answer to our question. Why does this vision bring the scattered elements of our lives into eternal relationships ; why, in the phrase already used, does the ideal universalize the real? Because the ideal *embodies* the real, — because it is the everlasting real. We must illustrate this from a very familiar fact, — and therein see

how true it is. *Home!* What is it? House, furniture, certain accustomed haunts, a few well-known lives, — does that describe it? What has analysis to do with it? It is a theme for the poet's insight, or for the noble outpourings of the organ. It is not the sum of things seen that make a home, but the *unseen* which makes it sacred, whatever the changes of outward conditions, and howsoever many of its tangible adjuncts be taken away. It is here the invisible, the ideal, that is the *real*. When we try in practical fashion to describe the whole as equal to the sum of its parts, we must not leave out this subtle and imponderable part. It is not *really* "practical" to forget to include the one element which gives permanency and universal significance.

So the State is not merely the sum of some seventy millions of integers, not merely one life with all its varied interests and strivings and affections and aims multiplied by some given denominator. It is more than the union of men for a government, more than a social contract, as Hobbes or Rousseau would have it, with superficial sight of it, more than ruler and cabinet and legislature. It is ideal, and yet most real, — more than all these because it gathers

them all up into a higher synthesis whose expression these are, but whose reality and essence are not here but in the unseen realm of ideas.

Is the Church the sum of its great history and its present life, — men and women all over the world striving to live a life whose pattern has been set forth in a particular book? Is it not rather the ideal, — the spiritual and unseen type descending out of heaven from our God, toward which in various degrees the churches approach, — themselves most really churches as they realize this ideal, and not as they prosper in numbers and wealth and in magnificence of the housing of the spiritual idea?

Or, more simply, would we say that a statue is so many pounds of marble plus so many days' work? Many statues might be justly so described, but those which have elevated the imaginations and ideals of generations have done so only because of an ideal embodied in them, because a thought from the unseen world has tenanted the marble or the bronze and *lives*, even where the marble is broken and the perfection of the work destroyed. In all these it is the ideal which is the real, and where vision ceases they perish precisely because the real is lost and the meaning of them is gone.

Think, for example, what the flag really is, — a few strips of varicolored bunting, a mere fancy of the seamstress's art, so many yards of red and white and blue arranged according to the decision of some legislative committee. Is that true? That is what we *see*. But when men see it in a foreign port, — or when its glory waves above the field of battle, — or when it proudly floats from the dome of the capital? If that is all, it is *nothing*. When the flag is really a flag it means home and loved ones, Lares and Penates, a type of government, a world's hope. Men do not die for a *rag*, but for this, in what it embodies, for the everlasting real which is here but the ideal, they give all they have with regret that they have but one life to give for their country.

So I have tried to answer the question with which we started, — Can we really divorce the practical and ideal? By illustrations drawn from science, the arts, education, common life, we have seen that the element which gives abiding value to all of these is the ideal, and that there is no permanence of interest where that is wanting. We have found, indeed, that it is "the unseen things" which "are eternal." and that what we most treasure in all that we call

most real is this factor which only the spirit in us perceives, and which cannot be measured nor weighed nor handled. It is this which binds us into the larger universe than our individual lives could know, and makes possible the cosmos, the universe, as over against our isolated lives. When it was said, thousands of years ago, "Where there is no vision the people perish," the writer caught the very deepest truth for the individual as well as for the national life, and stated what history and biography have always illustrated, that the life of nations and of men counts for little or nothing when the vision of the unseen is lost and the pursuit of the ideal is forsaken.

In all Roman history, for example, there is nothing so practical in that eminently practical people as the national ideal, — that outreaching for unity and compactness, the very genius of imperial rule, — which patiently gathered the scattered powers of Italy to itself through five hundred years, and then in a single century conquered the world. So long as there was an ideal there was growth, force, expansion; but in games, and pastimes, and banquets, and debaucheries, and vast wealth, used only to please and amuse, there was no vision. The end came



when the people were content with the actual, and when "practical" meant the meeting of the issues of each day as it appeared, and when there came against it the force of a new civilization with outlook and ideal.

That is but a parable of what has always been true in states and churches and individual lives. The so-called "practical" has meant defeat, failure, the sapping of the best of life, and the ideal has been the inspiration and the saviour of the real and itself the truly practical.

"Practical politics," then, must really mean political planning and administration that keep in view the great ends of the people's good and the nation's growth, and that have understanding of the conditions which preserve and exalt a people. The so-called "practical politics" which connote the mere service of a party, and the attainment of partisan success and spoils, and the satisfactions of a "boss," carry in themselves ruin for both party and country, and are practical only in the sense in which the near-sighted man sees a landscape.

Practical education is that which trains and broadens and enriches life, so that in the long stretch of the years it not only meets its responsibilities but understands the wise use of the

multiform resources of life, and it contrasts with the education which calls itself practical because it narrows life to some single aim or fits it to do some one thing. The life is more than meat.

The practical man is the one who while caring for present needs and meeting the duties of each day scrupulously, sees past them to the higher ends they subserve, and lives in the daily vision of higher possibilities, of greater attainments, of larger life, — the vision casting its glory backward over the common things until even the lowly duties catch a glimpse of it, as often a very unattractive landscape has a touch of heaven given it as the rising sun tints it and glorifies its plainness.





July-30 1901

JUL 11 1901

Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.  
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide  
Treatment Date: Sept. 2004

**PreservationTechnologies**

A WORLD LEADER IN PAPER PRESERVATION

111 Thomson Park Drive  
Cranberry Township, PA 16066  
(724) 779-2111



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 176 291 4

