



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.
Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

Reel
171

Box
62

Folder
33

The practical man, 1917.

The Tragedy & The Practical.

The Practical Man — A Tragedy

Men have a weakness for catch-words. Frequently this weakness becomes an obsession. Catch-words are safety-values for confused thinking. When men havin^t the power or the courage to define, analyze and systematize their passion-ridden thoughts they seek refuge in catch-words. Catch-words are evasions. They ~~savvy~~ ^{save} you from the necessity for logical thinking and evasive argumentation. When you are ~~fusin~~ ^{forced} to the wall by formidable logical opponents, just shut your eyes and in deep masonic solemnity utter your favorite catch-word and your opponents will scuttle off in despair.

Catch-words have enough truth in them to make them ~~formidable~~ ^{intriguing} and enough falsehood to make them ~~successes~~ ^{foibles} dangerous. The grain of truth that is in a catch-word is surface truth apparent to all. The bushels of falsehood are underground, ^{and as made} visible only to the searching eyes of the critical only.

Catch-words at best are mockeries of ~~life~~ ^{the} truth; at least ~~con-~~ ^{des} torsions. Catch-words are the blurred, ^{other} ^{spiced} minuscule caricatures ~~conceal~~ ^{of} truth. or rather broad, blatant caricatures of it.

Catch-words are the stock-in-trade of demagogues, the ^{coining} ^{petty} fabulists, ^{shaply} minds, the tools of Kuarks and the destruction ^{palpable} of souls.

Catch-words are short-cuts to Hell!

— ^{and to my little slogan}
Every age has its own little catch-word. Round it revolve the confused maggoty brains of the time. They cluster ^{faultily} round it like moths around a flame. If you want to understand the life and literature of an age, find its catchword. —

The latter half of the eighteenth century enthroned the catch word slogan: "Back to nature" and men practised themselves before it and made obeisance to it. It contained a

pain of truth, to be sure. It was an appeal to return from the artificialities of the age, its to the simplicity and wholesomeness of the natural. But it brought in its wake a basket of falsehood. It came to mean a disparagement of civilization, a denial of the value of culture & reputation, all the noble ideals of humanity. ~~the age~~ was moreover, grounded in a false conception of primitive life and in a false reading of history.

The era of industrial change in the

The French Revolution wanted its perchance, prominent ^{and audacious} ~~blasted~~ ~~thinking~~ in catch-words: liberty, equality, fraternity. The truth inherent in them ^{was} ~~was~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{falling} ~~destruction~~ of privileges and the enjoyed by some and their ^{new} ~~existing~~ for more democratic opportunities. But the errors and ignorance and errors and vicissitudes which these catchwords cloaked were terrible. Liberty was in reality a brutalistic lusty license. Equality was a ~~associate~~ ^{of rebels /} ~~moderate~~ Fraternity a disguise for arrogance. What a miserable maculation of sanctities! What a basal blotching of holiness!

The era of industrial revolution, sought to perpetuate its interests in another slogan: "laissez faire" "let it alone" Let industry alone. We not try to regulate or hamper it. Let the government keep its hands off and all will be well. What was ^{the peculiar} ~~to~~ saving virtue? The application of democracy to industry. The independence of capital from feudal control. ~~what were the~~ The freedom of unhampered expansion in all directions. What were the many ^{falsehoods} harbored by this catch-word: the irresponsibility of capital to the state. The autonomy of wealth; the disregard of social welfare; the ^{subordination} ~~sacrifice~~ of all social aims to economic production. In a word, rampant, irresponsible individualism.

3

During the second half of the nineteenth century a new catchword part from ninth to twentieth gathering movements as it went. It was Evolution. It shook the very foundations of the intellectual world. It struck in blind fury every department of human life. ~~with~~ ~~the~~ ~~beneficent~~ sweep it demolished the many structures reared ~~it is~~ in the past by the faith and custom of man. Its ~~nugatory~~ element of variety was tremendous; greater by far than that ~~usually~~ contained in catchwords. Evolution spelled the doom of supernaturalism, of faith in the miraculous. It called for a revision of ~~social~~ history, religion & morals. It shifted the centre of human interest from facts and ~~territories~~ to tendencies and influences from the exterior to the internal life. It established the primacy of ~~of~~ ^{But of the evils} ~~and falsehoods of~~ ^{also to account} life over institutions. Evolution came to stand also for rank materialism, for the negation of all the niceeties of life, for Evolution became the mace of cynicism, the excuse for brutality, selflessness ^{and} exploitation of the weak. Especially did that other catchword the offspring of Evolution - "survival of the fittest" play havoc in the world. Starting as a scientific ^{explanation} ~~interpretation~~ Evolution it turned up as a ^{barely-purified} ~~refined~~ justification of privilege and as a nefarious doctrine derived ^{special} from the virtue of look and misery in life. It became the flaunted boast of every scoundrel who walked rough-shod over the hearts of the weak and the unfortunate. It became of late the pseudo-scientific justification of national crimes of aggression and fightfulness.

Our own age has displayed a most unwholesome weakness for such catchwords, slogans and maxims. Truly, ~~has~~ ^{has} become an obsession.

we recite them as faithfully, as mechanically, as
stupidly as we recite our creeds. Creeds ~~rule~~
~~over the trouble & thinking.~~ To do catchwords.
Both are braces, or if you prefer ~~names~~ names.
They either bolster up your failing courage a ~~bit~~
go into sleep all ~~together~~. —

The favorite ~~catchword~~ catchword on the features
of our national life to-day are "Peace with Honor,"
"Efficiency," ^{By practical belief} "Practical" and much like. They all possess
that delirious vaporous and indefinite nature which
renders them so convenient in argumentation. They are
so disconcerting to the opponent. They hint at so
much and say so little.

To the pacifist who reads in this tragic war the
miserable failure of the policy of national torment
and who schemedly desires the promulgation of a
similar futile policy ^{in our own country, the} ~~influence in a cultured~~ "Peace with
Honor." ~~as though~~ The pacifist is stunned. He
faces in that culture the concentrated essence
of unmeasuring prejudice and superstition plus the
power of a partial truth which is ~~pleasant and~~
~~convenient~~. Henceforth all his logic and reasoning
will break in helpless rage upon the ~~unmeasurable~~ rock of the
catch-word.

Efficiency too, which is now passing glibly
from mouth to mouth, began its established career
as a plain, honest help to the problem of administra-

It has now, the administration of human institutions industrial, political & what not, needed a little stiffening and tightening, a little systematization and coordination. Efficiency became the slogan of the age. But it has also become the cry of ruthlessness in industrial life, cold, calculating cruelty in business, the suppression of every ^{warm} ~~in~~ ^{of} human touch in a ^{business} ~~house~~ ^{factory} place. The elimination of personality in the working man and the reducing of him to the level of a blind automaton producing machine. ~~Hot康康~~^{Hot康康} ~~last story~~

This evening I wish to prick the bubble of another misleading catchword; one which has been the ~~good~~ ~~old~~ stand-by of reactionaries and all other cunctitated fools; the middle of the well-fed, so-called experienced men-of-the-world so-called. The sort of men who mistake bones for brains and the titles for thinking interest for intellect, the sort of men ~~who are~~ who ~~are~~ It's the tautology most deplored. "Be practical." I have heard this transcendent wisdom inscribed in deep solemnity to college graduates. "When you get into the world don't be like rattle-brained madcaps following the listening to the green-call ^{and then trying to change the world} new fangled notions and ideas! Be practical" —

I have heard a young man speak impetuously as though his soul gleamed through every word he uttered, of the wrongs and insults of life, of the misery and injustice of the world and of his firm resolve to dedicate his life

to the service of humanity: and then I heard the denunciatory words of the older brother and the wiser (sic!) ^{saying to him} "Young man! you are inexperienced in the ways of the world. You are a dreamer, a Utopian. Come, be practical". The world will always be as it is." And he concluded his paternal admonition with a rather uncertain Biblical reference which greatly pleased him but which left the young man rather unmoved.

When ever ~~ever~~ would stout heart and daring souls would ~~gather~~ set out to find ~~blaze~~ a trail to a new land or fashion out of old ideas new links, and out of old walls new worlds, the a ^{majestic} chorus of voices is always ready on hand to intone in accents dire the stern warning & refection:— "Be practical" don't go skinning in the foam & foolish fads! keep your feet on earth. Be practical."

"Be Practical" that's the cry that gels the risen - cured soul that would heal the wounds of humanity with the sweet balm of idealism. "Be Practical"— that's the ^{that is} queen thrown at the sensitive soul that would transform with the wonderful alchemy of truth all hate into love, all prejudice into sympathy, all selfishness into service.

Recently there paced this pulpit a man who spent a life pleased with ~~many days and many~~ longevity in supreme impracticability— so the knowing and the well-informed men of the world said.

He spoke in the wisdom 5 ago and with the fervor
of youth. His ~~was~~ thoughts were living echoes of pro-
phetic truths. He spoke of the new social order. He
pictured the stupidity, the folly, the tragedy of the
old ^{which gives the} present social order. He laid bare its foundation,
~~& scripting~~ mounds of false theories. He showed
where a new social program - of service and co-
operation - ~~were~~ could transform it completely, would
bring order out of chaos and life-giving harmony
out of discord. Every note ~~of~~ rang true. Its intellec-
tual honesty and scientific charity was without
reproach. And yet.... Many a man and woman
on leaving the did knowingly shake ^{their} head and
say - "Impractical - Utopian".... As if this very
attitude of men - This lauding of any sound theory
of social reconstruction as impractical does but
upman - wasnt the very thing that the lecture
was most bitterly attacked? As if the fallacy of our
day to consider the ~~the~~ ^{the} cumnally-bungling order of society
to-day as sufficiently practical was not the object
of the speakers severest ~~attack~~ denunciation &
Practical! What is practical? and who is practi-
cal? Is a social order ~~based~~ ^{founded} on error and igno-
rance reared in injustice and inequality, blotched
and smeared with hate and envy, is that a practical
thing? And is he practical who would rebuild
and rewrite it with a little plastering of alms-
giving and a little paint of charity?.... Or is the
~~man~~ who a social order founded on truth and
knowledge, reared in justice and equity, ^{sacrificed} ~~transcended~~

with the documents, & law and good-will, practical?
and the man who prophet-like would "root out,
pull down, destroy and throw down and then rebuild
and plant anew"? practical. Is patch-work practical
or is thoroughness? Is truth practical or is
error?

Were the wise, experienced practical men - g. the world
who urged, ent'g the followers of their erotic wisdom,
all Europe to arms to the teeth, as a practical
means of self-defence, which ^{unquestionably} plunged
Europe into the deadliest war, & all times, were
they really practical? And were the now-shaken,
feather-brained, irresponsible and impractical
men who preached disarmament and ab-
staining and universal peace really so im-
practical? Hark! the events of the past
two and a half years proclaimed the latter
as the most supremely practical and that last
former as the most criminally impractical!
Think of it! After two and a half years of the
bloodiest grappling in history, after the slaying
~~of~~ ^{of} five million ^{human beings}, the maiming of 10 million,
the suspenseless ciphering, widowing and
impoverishing of 50 million, the destruction
of the painfully-wrought hundred thousand
nations - an ultimatum is now made to stop
fighting and go back to where they were
before they began.... And all this of course
the work of wise, experienced practical men - g. the
world... yes diplomats and kings..... fools! ...

Who is practical? And what is practical?
 God is practical and truth is the most practical
 thing in the world! And any turning away from
 God and every deviation from truth - absolute
 and uncompromising - is impractical. Every
 man who makes God the ^{supposition} ~~supposition~~ & his scheme
~~supposing its foundation~~ ~~knowing distant and dangerous~~
 life be that scheme ~~as visionary and also specious~~
~~as possible~~ is practical. Every man who makes
truth the pillars of his

The practical man who regards his ^{own} limited store
 of knowledge and experience as the only sane and sure
 guide to life, who sees only just beyond his nose and
 no further, who thinks in terms & events and tendencies, who
 is penny-wise and pound-foolish is the greatest tragedy
 in life. He misses the zest of life; the thrill of adventure, the
 glow of enterprise, the discipline of gigantic effort and sub-
 lime patience, the charm of uncertainty. Deeming him-
 self wise, he is foolish. Deeming himself important, he is in-
 significant. And when he is ^{down-right} ~~a practical~~ obstacle
 in the way of progress, he is a general nuisance.

My message to you, my friends, and especially to
 you my young friends is this:- Do not permit the
 noble passions and far-flung visions with which you
 may be blessed, to be chilled by the cold breath of the
 insidient slogan: "Be practical". ~~But~~ Let not your
 adventurous spirit be frightened by it. It's a
 shabby, slyly scarecrow. No man who
 ever added a pillar to the rising temple of civilization
 was ever practical - as men call practical. Had
 they been practical they had never been burnt, stoned

and crucified.... If to be practical is to be steeped 10
in the quagmire of convention, to be perfused with
legitimized inciety, to stifle every ^{noble} impulse
and high rearing aspiration, then my friend be tho-
roughly and absolutely impractical; for you may then
get a taste of heaven. But if you be impractical
in the things men call practical, you will be sub-
limely practical in the things men call impractical.
You will be across the span of the impractical
you will be reaching the hem of God's robe
of glory. And greater practicability hath no man.



Men have a weakness for catch-words. Frequently this weakness becomes an obsession. Catch - words are safety valves for confused thinking. When ~~XXX~~ men haven't the power or the courage to define, analyze and systematize their passion - ridden thoughts they seek refuge in catch -words. Catch -words are conveniences: they relieve you of the necessity for logical thinking and consistent argumentation. When you are driven to the wall by formidable logical opponents, just shut your eyes and in deep sonorous solemnity utter your favorite catch-word, and your opponent will scuttle off in despair.

Catch-words have enough truth in them to make them attractive and enough falsehood to make them dangerous. The grain of truth that is in a catch-word is surface truth apparent to all. The bushels of falsehood is underground and is made visible to the searching eyes of the critical only.

 Cathh-words ~~XXX~~ at best are (mantles, markers) of truth; at worst distortions. Catch-words are the blurred, faded indistinct miniature of truth, or rather the broad, blatant caricatures of it.

Catch-words are the stock-in-trade of demagogues, the cooing (coins) of petty minds, the tools of knaves and the pabulum of ~~XXX~~ fools.

Catch-words are short-cuts to hell!

Every age has its own little catch-word and its own little slogan. Round it revolve the confused maggoty brains of the time. They flutter round it like moths around a flame. If you want to understand the life and literature of an age, find its catch-word.

The latter half of the eighteenth century enthroned the slogan "back to nature". And men prostrated themselves before it and made obeisances to it. It contained a grain of truth, to be sure. It was an appeal to return from the artificialities of the age to the simplicity and

wholesomesness of the natural. But it brought in its wake a bushel of falsehoods. It came to mean a disparagement of civilization, a denial of culture, a refutation of all the noble ideals of humanity. It was, moreover, grounded in a false conception of primitive life and in a false reading of history.

The French Revolution vented its perturbed, passionate mind- and (soul) travail in catch-words: liberty, equality, fraternity. The truth inherent in them was the challenging principle and the cry for more democratic opportunities. But the ignorance and error and viciousness which these catch-words clouded were terrible. Liberty was in reality a brutish, lusty license. Equality was a pretext for insolence. Fraternity a disguise for arrogance. What a miserable maculation of sanctities! What a banal blotching of holiness!

The era of the industrial revolution too sought to perpetuate its interests in a slogan: "laissez-faire". "Let it alone". Do not try to regulate or hamper it. Let the government keep its hands off and all will be well. What was the peculiar saving virtue of this catch-word? The application of democracy to industry. The independence of capital from feudal control. The freedom of unhampered expansion in all directions.

What were the many falsehoods harbored by this catchword: the irresponsibility of capital to the state. The autocracy of wealth; the disregard of social welfare; the subordination of all social aims to economic production. In a word, rampant, irresponsible individualism.

During the second half of the nineteenth century a new catch-word past from mouth to mouth, gathering momentum as it went. It was Evolution. It shook the very foundations of the world. It struck in blind fury every department of human life. Its measure of verity was tremendous; greater by far than that which is commonly contained in catch-words. Evolution spelt the doom of supernaturalism. It

called for a revision of history, religion and morals. It shifted the centre of human interest from facts and events to tendencies and influences, from the external to the internal, and it established the primacy of life over institutions. But of the evils and errors and falsehoods it Evolution came ~~to~~ ~~XXXXX XXXX~~ to account for rank materialism, for the negation of all the niceties of life. Evolution became the (mace) of cynicism, the excuse for brutality, selfishness and exploitation. Especially did that catchword, ~~XXXXX~~ the offspring of evolution - "survival of the fittest", play havoc with the world. Starting as a scientific explanation of evolution it wound up as a brazen-faced justification of denial special privilege and as a ~~XXXXXX~~ of the virtue of love and in life. It became the flaunted boast of every scoundrel who walked roughshod over the hearts ~~XXX~~ of the weak and the unfortunate. It ~~XXX~~ became of late the pseudo-scientific justification of national crimes of aggression and frightfulness.



Our own age has displayed a most unwholesome weakness for just such catch-words, slogans and mottoes. Verily, it has become an obsession. We recite them as faithfully, as mechanically, as stupidly as we recite our creeds.

The favorite catchword ~~XX~~ emblazoned on the banners of our national life today are "peace with honor" and "efficiency", "be practical" and such like. They all possess that delicious vagueness and indefiniteness which render them so convenient in argumentation. They are so disconcerting to the opponent. They hint at so much and say so little.

in this

To the pacifist who reads ~~XXX~~ tragic war ~~XXXX~~ the miserable ~~XXXXX~~ ~~XXXX~~ failure of the policy of national armament and who vehemently decries the promulgation of a similar fateful policy in our own country, the bewildering retort in a catch-word is hurled back - "peace with honor". The pacifist is stunned. He faces in that catch-word the concentrated

essence of unreasoning prejudice and superstition plus the fervor of a partial truth. Henceforth all his logic and reasoning will break in helpless rage upon the immovable rock of the catch-word.

Efficiency too ~~is~~ which is now passing glibly from mouth to mouth began its exalted career as a ~~new~~ plain, honest help to problems of administration. The administration of human institutions, industrial, political ~~and~~ or what not, needed a little stiffening and tightening, a little systematization and coordination. Efficiency itself became the slogan of the age. But it has also become the cry of ruthlessness in industrial, life, cold calculating cruelty in business, the suppression of every warm, humanitarian impulse, the elimination of personality in the working man and the reducing of him to the level of a blind, automatic producing machine.

This evening I wish to prick the bubble of our misleading catchwords; one which has been the good standby of reactionaries and all other conceited fools; the shibboleth of the well fed, experienced man of the world so-called. The sort of man who mistakes bonds for brains and interest for intellect. It's the tantalizingly sweet refrain "be practical". I have heard this transcendent wisdom imparted in deep solemnity to college graduates. "When you get out into the world don't be rattle-brained madcaps lidtening to the siren call of new fangled notions and ideas! "Be practical".

I have heard a young man speak importunately as though his soul glistened through every word he uttered, of the worngs and hurts of life, of the misery and injustice of the world and of his firm resolve to dedicate his life to the service of humanity: and then I heard the , deliberate half patronizing half tone of the older and the wiser, (sic!) man~~s~~ saying to him: "Young man! You are inexperienced in the ways of the world. You are a dreamer, a utopian. Come, 'be practical'. The

world will always be as it is." And he concluded his paternal admonition with a rather uncertain Biblical reference which greatly pleased him but which left the young man unconvinced.

Whenever ~~XX~~ stout hearts and daring souls would set out to blaze a trail to a new land or to fashion out of old lives and out of old worlds new worlds, a majestic chorus of voices always ready on hand to intone in accents dire the solemn warning of reaction : -"Be practical." Don't go in the foam of foolish faces! keep your feet on earth. Be practical."

"Be practical". That's the cry that greets the vision-cured soul that would heal the wounds of humanity with the sweet balm of idealism. "Be practical" - that's the sneer that is thrown at the sensitive soul that would transform with the wonderful alchemy of truth all hate with love, all ~~XXXX~~ prejudice into sympathy, all selfishness into service.

(graced)

Recently there paced this pulpit a man who spent a life blessed with longevity in supreme impracticability - so the knowing and the well informed men-of-the-world said. He spoke in the wisdom of age and the fervor of youth. His thoughts were living echoes of prophetic truths. He spoke of the new social order. He pictured the stupidity, the folly, the tragedy of the old, the present social order. He laid bare ~~XXX~~ its foundations which were the shifting sands of false theories. He showed where a new social program of service and cooperation would transform it completely, would bring order out of chaos, and harmony out of discord.

(His)

Every note rang true. Its intellectual honesty and scientific chastity was without reprobation. And yet ... many a man and woman in leaving did knowingly shake their heads and say "impractical...utopian"...as if this very attitude of men, this daubing of every sound theory of social reconstruction as impractical and utopian --- wasn't the very thing that the lecture most bitterly attacking. As if the fallacy of our day to

consider our criminally-bungling order of society as eminently practical wasn't the object of the speaker's severest denunciations.

Practical! What is practical? And who is practical? Is a social order founded on error and ignorance, reared in injustice and iniquity, blotched and smeared with hate and envy, is that a practical thing? And is he practical who would rebuild ~~XX~~ and renovate it with a little plastering of alms -giving and a little paint of charity? ... Or is a social order founded in truth and knowledge, reared in justice and equity, glorified with the ornaments of love and good-will practical? And is the man who prophet-like would "root out, pull down, destroy and throw down and then rebuild and replant anew" practical? Is patch-work practical or is thoroughness? Is truth practical or is error?

We're the wise experienced ~~WXXX~~ practical men-of-the-world who urged, out of the fullness of their esoteric wisdom, all Europe to arm to the teeth as a practical measure of self-defense, which urging ultimately plunged Europe into the deadliest war of all times, were they really practical? And were the moon-struck, feather-brained, irresponsible and impractical men who preached disarmament and arbitration and universal peace really so impractical? Haven't the events of the past two and a half years proclaimed the latter as the most supremely practical, and the former as the most criminally impractical! .. Think of it! After two and a half years of the bloodiest grappling in history, after the slaughter of three million human beings, the maiming of eight million, the orphaning, widowing and impoverishing of 50 million, the destruction of the painfully wrought handiwork of generations - an offer is now made to stop fighting and go back to where they were before they began and all this of course is the work of wise, experienced practical men-of-the-world... yes diplomats and kings... fools!

Who is practical? And what is practical? God is practical

and truth is the most practical thing in the world'. And any turning away from ~~XXXXX~~ God and every deviation from truth - absolute and uncompromising - is impractical. Every man who makes God of his scheme of life and truth its foundation, be that scheme however distant and daring, is practical.

The practical man who regards his own limited store of knowledge and experience as the only ~~XXXX~~ sane and sure guide to life, who sees only just beyond his nose and no further, who is penny-wise and pound*foolish, is the greatest tragedy in life. He misses the zest of life: the thrill of adventure, the glow of enterprise, the discipline of gigantic effort and sublime patience, the charm of uncertainty. Deeming himself wise he is foolish. Deeming himself important he is insignificant. And when he is ~~XX~~ not a down-right obstacle in the way of progress, he is a general nuisance.

My message to you, my friends, and especially my young friends, is this: - Do not permit noble passions and far-flung visions with which you may be blessed to be chilled by the cold breath of the insolent slogan :"BE Practical." Let not your adventurous spirits be frightened by it. It's a shabby, slovenly scarecrow. No man who ever added a pillar to the rising temple of civilization was ever practical. Had they been practical they had ^ever been burnt, stoned, and crucified... If to be practical is to be steeped in the quagmire of convention, to be surfeited with legitimatized iniquity, to stifle every noble impulse and ranging aspiration, then my friend, be thoroughly and absolutely impractical: for you may then get a taste of heaven. But if you be impractical in the things men call practical you will be sublimely practical in the things men call impractical. Across the span of the impractical you will be reaching the hem of God's robe of glory. And greater practicability hath no man....