Pragmatism: Philosophical Aspects

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Abstract: Pragmatism is a philosophical movement which began in the late nineteenth century in the USA and exerted significant influence until around the time of John Dewey's death in 1952. Pragmatism fell from favor for much of the latter part of the 20th century, but is now seeing a revival. The "classical" pragmatists are C. S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Their philosophies differed a good deal, but all defended broadly empiricist views of thought and knowledge which emphasize the role of thought in guiding action and reject various traditional empiricist psychological positions. Pragmatists also tend to reject correspondence theories of truth and attempts to ground human knowledge on a special "foundational" set of beliefs. Prominent English-speaking philosophers associated with pragmatism in more recent years include W. V. O. Quine, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Robert Brandom.

Pragmatism began in the late nineteenth century with the work of C. S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Pragmatism's influence subsided after the death of Dewey in 1952, but is seeing a sustained revival. This article will first give a rough summary of characteristic themes in pragmatist philosophy, and then look more closely at Peirce, James, and Dewey. The final section will discuss the transformation of pragmatism in the late 20th century and new forms it is taking in the 21st.

1. "Classical" Pragmatism

Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey are often referred to as the "classical" pragmatists. All three were born and worked in the USA, and all combined their philosophical work with strong interests in other disciplines. The views of the "classical pragmatists" have common themes but are also dissimilar in many ways. They developed views of thought, knowledge, and related topics which are empiricist in a broad sense but reject much of the psychological picture usually associated with empiricism. The empiricist tradition focused on the connections between thought and sensory experience. The classical pragmatists did so too, but in a way that treated thought in the context of its overall role in the life of a human agent, especially in the guidance of action. The pragmatists also thought that traditional empiricism has too passive and too atomistic a view of the mind.

Pragmatist philosophers generally reject attempts to understand human knowledge by appeal to some special set of "foundational" beliefs that support all the others. For pragmatism, both specific beliefs and general methods of inquiry should be judged by their consequences, by their usefulness in achieving human goals. Although pragmatists stress the role of knowledge in guiding action and solving practical problems, it is an error to see pragmatism as claiming that the direction of research, or choices between rival theories, should be guided substantially by practical or commercial demands. A detailed account of the relationship between theoretical work and practical goals was only worked out successfully by Dewey, though, as discussed below.

The nature of truth has been a central topic for pragmatists, and a source of much trouble for them in the classical period. Pragmatists generally reject "correspondence" theories of truth, theories which claim that a true belief or statement is one which represents the world as it really is. After rejecting correspondence, pragmatists have had a difficult time devising an alternative view of truth.

An additional unifying thread in classical pragmatism is more subtle and elusive. The classical pragmatists held that there is an important place in the universe for human choice and initiative (a theme more prominent in James and Dewey than in Peirce). In different ways they opposed philosophical systems which regard the world as "finished," "complete," or impervious to the effects of choice. Pragmatists also tend to hold

"humanistic" perspectives on matters involving morals and values, opposing both nihilistic views that reject all moral assessment as founded on illusion, and views that locate moral and other evaluative facts outside the everyday world of human striving and well-being.

2. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)

Peirce's career began well but ended very badly, without his ever having held a long-term academic position. His writings are very ambitious but often disorganized. He evaded obscurity, and at times sheer expiration, largely through James's support.

Peirce's most important works discuss the relations between doubt, inquiry, belief, and action. His central texts on these topics are two papers which appeared in the *Popular Science Monthly*, "The Fixation of Belief" in 1877 and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in 1878. Peirce also wrote a good deal about logic, measurement, the theory of signs (which he called "semiotic"), probability, evidence, and some speculative cosmological ideas (Buchler 1955, Misak 2013).

Peirce argued that inquiry always begins with "real and living doubt" which he distinguished from the feigned doubt of Descartes. Doubt prompts inquiry, which aims at belief. Peirce claimed that the essence of belief is the establishment of a habit of action. Alexander Bain had made this suggestion in the mid-nineteenth century, within the framework of an associationist psychology. Peirce and other pragmatists made this link between belief and action central to their philosophies. Peirce believed that science is the most effective method for relieving doubt and acquiring useful habits of action. His defense of science emphasized the cumulative, long-term, and social properties of scientific inquiry, especially the tendency of scientific testing to produce a "convergence" of belief among people who start from different positions.

In his paper "How to Make our Ideas Clear," Peirce argued for a principle which later became famous as "the pragmatic maxim." Peirce said that to work out what the meaning of a "conception" is, we should work out "what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." This principle is obscure and was later paraphrased by James, Peirce, and others in a number of conflicting

ways. One possible interpretation is to see the famous "maxim" as expressing a fairly familiar empiricist view – that our concept of any object is just our concept of its possible effects on our experience. Then the novelty in Peirce's paper lies in his attempt to derive this empiricist principle from an unusual starting point — a theory of the role of belief in guiding action. Some later discussions in Peirce and James treat the maxim itself as a claim about how the meaning of a belief or set of beliefs (a "conception") is found in its effects on the believer's action.

In the same paper Peirce also gave a definition of truth. He said that what we mean by "the truth" is the opinion which is "fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate," or in another formulation, the opinion that will be held at the limit of scientific inquiry. Both here and elsewhere Peirce treated topics in epistemology and the philosophy of science in ways that placed much emphasis on the social context of testing and investigation.

3. William James (1842–1910)

James made pragmatism famous, especially in his 1907 book *Pragmatism*, the most widely read of all pragmatist writings. James had a brilliant and influential career based at Harvard, in both philosophy and psychology.

James wrote a number of important works before he began calling himself a "pragmatist" and aligning his views with those of Peirce. In his earlier philosophical works, James argued that we have the right to actively choose sides on momentous, unresolved philosophical issues that will affect how we live our lives (James 1897/1956). Choices made on these issues will be strongly affected by our individual temperaments; we should not expect all individuals to find the same philosophies appealing. The issues James applied this doctrine to included the existence of God, the freedom of the will, and the reality of moral facts. In this earlier period James also published a landmark work in psychology, his two-volume *Principles of Psychology* (1890).

From 1898 James began to embed his characteristic themes within an overtly "pragmatist" framework. He gave credit to Peirce's role in discussions in Cambridge in the early 1870s, in a social circle called the "Metaphysical Club" (Menand 2001). To a greater extent than Peirce and Dewey, James took pragmatism to be continuous with the

tradition of English-speaking empiricist philosophers such as David Hume and J. S. Mill. James publicized pragmatism with great energy, and transformed it in ways that induced unease in Peirce. James presented pragmatism as a way to avoid the errors of the two key rival philosophies of his day — overly scientistic and materialist empiricism on one side, and sentimental, over-optimistic religious idealism on the other. James endorsed a version of the pragmatic maxim, described above, taking it to be a method for finding the real content in philosophical doctrines and disagreements. James argued that when the maxim is applied to many standard philosophical debates, it does *not* typically show that these lack content; instead the maxim reveals hidden and substantial issues that are at stake. These issues, for James, often concern the long-term direction being taken by the universe, and the role of human choice in affecting how things turn out. James saw pragmatism as a way of distilling the genuine human significance from obscure philosophical theories and debates.

James was a less scientistic thinker than Peirce, and more individualistic than Peirce and Dewey. James talked of assessing ideas in terms of their "cash value," an unfortunate phrase which led many to interpret pragmatism as vulgar and anti-intellectual. James also invited a stream of criticism through his tendency to discuss the nature of truth in a vague and simplistic way. He said at various times that true ideas are just those that can be verified, or those that are useful. Some of the criticisms of James rested on misinterpretations, but there is no question that he wrote about this topic imprecisely. Despite this, James's writings have endured. His discussions of the role of individual temperament in philosophical choices never seem dated, for example, and James's attractive personality, imagination, and boundless energy radiate from the pages of his work.

4. John Dewey (1859–1952)

Dewey's work is the culmination of the "classical" period in the pragmatist tradition. In the course of a remarkably long and productive career, Dewey published in virtually all areas of philosophy and in psychology, education, and politics. He wrote both popular, accessible works and dense, uncompromising ones. Dewey spent his most important years first at the University of Chicago, where he worked in philosophy, education, and

psychology, and then at Columbia, where he focused more on philosophy and was also active in politics.

Dewey's work went through several phases. Early in his career he accepted an idealist philosophy of the type influenced by Hegel, and also had Christian interests. Around the turn of the century he turned toward a more scientific approach to philosophy, influenced by Darwin and by James's *Principles of Psycholog*y. Around this time Dewey also dropped his commitment to Christianity. Dewey came to reject all supernatural forms of religion, and did not share James's sympathy for mystical ideas, but he continued to see value in some kinds of religious experience (Dewey 1969–72, 1976–83).

The scientifically oriented philosophy Dewey developed after 1900 was initially fairly similar to James's pragmatism, and some of this work influenced and was acknowledged by James. In later decades Dewey reworked pragmatist themes within what he called a "naturalistic" framework — a framework which sets out from a biological description of living organisms and their relations to their environments, and emphasizes also the importance of social interaction in human life. Dewey argued that intelligence is a means for humans to transform their environments in order to deal with the problems posed by uncertainty and change in natural events.

In *Experience and Nature* (1925) perhaps his greatest work, Dewey defended his naturalistic view of mind and knowledge, and criticized the philosophical tradition for its postulation of false divides or "gulfs" – between mind and matter, thought and object, theoretical and practical. The philosophical tradition is plagued by "dualisms" which lead to pseudoproblems, problems of establishing contact between realms that should never have been set against each other in the first place. The source of these dualisms is a "split in being" established by the ancient Greeks, a split between the "perfect, permanent, self-possessed" and the "defective, changing, relational." Dewey sought to replace these dualisms with a view based on various kinds of "continuity" – between mind and nature, between organism and environment, and between cognition and simpler biological capacities. For Dewey, these natural continuities also provide the material needed to resolve oppositions between fact and value. Much of Dewey's later work is a mixture of careful system-building based on assertions of "continuity" and sweeping historical

surveys, tracing the histories of crucial philosophical errors back and forward through thousands of years (Dewey 1981–90).

Dewey defended a social theory of mind, claiming that thought only exists within a language-using community. He argued that the primary role of science is to help human societies deal with problems and control their environments. But Dewey thought that it was unscientific for scientists to direct their work according to *specific* practical problems. Rather, science is the study of a special subset of properties of natural affairs — relations and connections, called by Dewey "instrumental" properties. Science is most successful in expanding our capacities for problem-solving and transforming our environment when it is directed on the study of the instrumental features of nature in an open-ended way, unconstrained by immediate practical applications.

Dewey rejected what he called the "spectator theory of knowledge," the view that the genuine knower is someone who registers what is going on but does not intervene. Instead, the proper role of knowledge is to enable humans to transform their situations in beneficial ways. This also led Dewey into some of the same arguments that James had with defenders of correspondence or "copy" theories of truth. Dewey thought that theories of truth as correspondence were aimed at inventing magical relations between thought and the world in order to overcome what he saw as a nonexistent problem — the problem of how the mind and the external world could have any contact with each other. He also thought correspondence theories belong with a spectator view of the role of knowledge. He did not take seriously the idea that "copying" the world can be a *means* to transforming it; he saw these inevitably as rivals.

Dewey wrote often of the role played by knowledge in "transforming" or "reconstructing" the world, but this "transformation" should not be understood as implying an idealist metaphysical view. Dewey thought that knowledge is a factor in changing things in the world because knowledge has a role in guiding *action*, which transforms things by means of physical relationships. I said above that a second thread in the classical pragmatists, in addition to their treatment of thought and action, is a resistance to a "closed" conception of the universe and an assertion of the significance of human choice. In Dewey's work, this theme, which was developed in a vague and overly cosmic way in James, is given a more down-to-earth treatment. Dewey insisted on the

reality of the progressive re-shaping of the world by human choice, though this re-shaping is limited in scope, contingent in its effects, and draws on craft skills as well as ideas.

Dewey was a significant figure in US political and social thought (Westbrook 1991). He defended a version of liberalism and wrote extensively about the proper structure of a democratic society. At various times he was attacked by both the right and the left. He hoped for a more "democratic" economic order, but kept communism at arm's length. Dewey's best known political activity was his chairing of an international inquiry into Stalin's trial of Trotsky. The inquiry entitled its report "Not Guilty."

At Chicago, Dewey worked closely with George Herbert Mead, a founder of social psychology in the USA. Mead argued that human individuality is a product of social embedding; that both cognition in general and specific mental developments such as a sense of self emerge as products of various kinds of symbolic behavior within a community. Dewey also wrote about art and took a lifelong interest in education. When he was at Chicago he established an experimental school. Dewey favored problem-solving as an approach to all types of learning, and his ideas remained influential in education during decades when his name had almost dropped out of English-speaking philosophy.

5. After Dewey

Dewey's ideas, and pragmatism in general, subsided from philosophical discussion for several decades after Dewey's death in 1952. A primary reason for this was the growing focus on formal logic and the philosophy of language in US philosophy after World War II, prompted especially by the immigration of European philosophers and logicians who defended a rigorous "analytic" style of philosophy. After Peirce, the pragmatists had not taken an interest in formal logic. Dewey also had idiosyncratic and rather opaque ideas in the philosophy of language, which rapidly came to seem dated.

One of the leaders of the new analytic philosophy, W.V.O. Quine, had significant effects on the perceived viability of pragmatism, and on its interpretation, through some brief remarks in famous works, especially "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951). There Quine, in response especially to Rudolf Carnap, endorsed what he saw as a pragmatist

view of belief change. Quine's emphasis was on conceptual flexibility; he held that even the most basic parts of our network of beliefs (including logical principles) could rationally be modified in response to unexpected experiences. Quine's influence helped keep the idea of a pragmatist epistemology alive, but in a way that foregrounded some pragmatist themes and backgrounded others in a new way (Godfrey-Smith 2013). Quine treated beliefs as tools for prediction – in this way he was closer to the mainstream empiricist tradition. He did not give the link between thought and action anything like the role it had in classical pragmatism.

The most important figure in the revival of pragmatism has been Richard Rorty (1931-2007), who also carried the influence of pragmatism outside of philosophy into neighboring disciplines. Rorty viewed himself as carrying on the tradition of Dewey, and to a lesser extent James. Rorty called himself an "antiessentialist" about traditional philosophical concepts such as truth, knowledge and justice (Rorty 1982). Antiessentialism in this sense is the denial that there is anything general to say, from a philosophical point of view, about the *nature* of truth, the *nature* of justice, and so on. It is possible and worthwhile to give a theory of how the word "true" functions in ordinary discourse, but pointless to give a theory of truth that goes beyond this.

The continuity between Rorty's ideas and Dewey's is a matter of controversy. Dewey's mature work, as outlined above, includes a mixture of sweeping historical stories aimed at dissolving philosophical problems, and careful system-building of his own. Rorty endorses the dissolving but not the system-building. However, a strong case can be made that Dewey's critical points and his attempts to "get over" standard debates usually depend on his positive philosophical theories. And James, as discussed above, used pragmatism to breathe new life into metaphysical problems, not to deflate them. As Rorty's views on traditional philosophical questions are so focused on dissolving and deflating, it is in some ways more appropriate to associate Rorty with the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein rather than with pragmatism. Rorty, however, made a substantial contribution to the development of pragmatist ideas by claiming that the right approach to the problem of truth for the pragmatist philosopher is not to identify the true with the useful, or with the verifiable, but to give a "deflationary" view of truth (Rorty 1991). Deflationism, which was developed in the late 20th century in other parts of the

philosophy of language, holds that to say that a sentence is true is not to say that the sentence has a special correspondence relation to the world, or that it has a special kind of usefulness, but is just to *assert* the sentence, perhaps in a way sensitive to the context of the conversation. We have the word "true" in our language because it allows us to abbreviate, give credit, and generalize – "Everything you said about Toyotas is true." The word "true" is no more than a conversational tool of that kind.

Many other philosophers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries who have allied themselves with pragmatism have been largely concerned with problems of language, meaning, and truth. These philosophers have also taken on board the emphasis on flexibility in belief change, and the rejection of foundationalist views in epistemology, that were present in the classical pragmatists and foregrounded by Quine. In some cases, though by no means all, a link to pragmatism is seen as part of an attempt to dissolve or "get over" traditional debates about mind and knowledge.

Hilary Putnam was for some years a leading defender of a strongly "realist" set of views about the relation between thought and the world, but he changed his mind, and developed a position he called "internal realism," which rejects the correspondence theory of truth and which Putnam allied to pragmatism. Putnam argued that it is not possible for a theory to pass every possible test, and command consensus when all the evidence is in, and yet be false; this view resembles Peirce's theory of truth. Putnam has recently reassessed these issues yet again. Robert Brandom (2010) defends a project he calls "analytic pragmatism." This is an approach to language that focuses on the *use* of words and linguistic forms in discourse, as contrasted with making the *meaning* of words primary. This emphasis on use owes much to Ludwig Wittgenstein. Huw Price (2003) also defends a use-based approach to language, rejects the correspondence theory of truth, and sees his pragmatism as strongly deflationary of metaphysical issues, advocating a "quietist" approach – a resolutely non-theoretical stance – towards many traditional debates. Philip Kitcher (2012) also wants philosophy to move, with the aid of pragmatism, past standard debates in epistemology and metaphyics but is less deflationary about social and moral philosophy, where more substantial work is to be done. Other contemporary philosophers with significant connections to pragmatism include Simon Blackburn, Susan Haack, Cheryl Misak, and Arthur Fine.

In my outline of the "classical" pragmatists I emphasized their treatment of the link between belief and action. This, for the classical pragmatists, was an innovation that took them beyond the mainstream empiricist tradition. For better or worse, from Quine onwards this theme subsided in "pragmatist" philosophy. The emphasis instead has been on conceptual flexibility (Quine), rejection of the correspondence theory of truth and representation-based approaches to language (Rorty, Brandom, Price), and finding ways to get beyond sterile philosophical debates (Rorty, Price, Kitcher, Fine). But as the early sections of this article may also have made clear, wholesale opposition to philosophical theorising had little role in classical pragmatism. James, in particular, thought that the significance of standard philosophical debates was, if anything, *under*estimated. Dewey's criticisms of the philosophical tradition were not offered in a free-standing form, isolated from positive views on philosophical topics; the critical and constructive sides of his thought were tied tightly together. So the themes of recent pragmatists differ a fair amount from those of the originators of the movement, but at all stages, including the "classical," pragmatism has been a diverse and mutable collection of ideas.

***See also*:**

Dewey, John (1859–1952); Empiricism, History of; Irrationality: Philosophical Aspects; James, William (1842–1910); Mead, George Herbert (1863–1931); Social Science, the Idea of; Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1889–1951)

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Westbrook, J. (1991). *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Pragmatism: Philosophical Aspects. Chapter Â· March 2015 with 5 Reads. How we measure 'reads'.Â Pragmatism is a philosophical movement which began in the late nineteenth century in the USA and exerted significant influence until around the time of John Dewey's death in 1952. Pragmatism fell from favor for much of the latter part of the twentieth century, but is now seeing a revival. The 'classical' pragmatists are C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. In philosophy, pragmatism is a school of thought that starts from the insight that words are tools. Words donâ€™t have inherent meanings attached to them from birth â€” rather, they gain their meanings through repeated use. Example. Nobody ever decided that â€œbearâ€ would mean a furry creature with teeth; over time, people found this syllable was useful for pointing out the dangerous creatures, and this helped them survive and thrive. The same is true for important theoretical concepts like power, freedom, or truth.