

PHI 581 -- PRAGMATISM

Fall 2008, Mondays 5:00 - 7:30 p.m., Memorial 209

Pragmatism, a style of philosophy initiated in the 1870's by American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and William James (1842-1910), is best characterized by the method expressed in the "pragmatic maxim," according to which the meaning of a concept is determined by the experiential or practical consequences of its application. Peirce's aspiration to a reformed, scientific philosophy free of metaphysical excesses is sustained by the realist elements of his view of perception and of kinds and laws; muted by nominalist leanings in James and Hegelian leanings in Dewey, pragmatism was transformed by F. C. S. Schiller into a revolutionary relativism -- and, in the late twentieth century, by Richard Rorty into a conception of philosophy as closer to literature than to science, no longer a form of inquiry, but only "carrying on the conversation" of Western culture. Various (mostly radical) forms of pragmatism are now influential in literary studies, sociology, history, and political and legal theory; and neo-analytic philosophy has recently shown some interest in (ersatz) forms of pragmatism as well. The same has happened in pragmatist legal philosophy, from its classical expression in Oliver Wendell Holmes to its vulgarization by Posner and others.

The course will consist primarily of a close study of the work of the classical pragmatists, and secondarily of a survey of some recent work presented as in the pragmatist tradition.

Course Materials:

Susan Haack, ed., with Associate Editor Robert Lane, *Pragmatism Old and New: Selected Writings*, ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006). All students will need to have a copy of this book, and bring it to class with them.

Cornelis de Waal *On Pragmatism* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005). It is recommended that students also buy this book.

Plus supplementary selection of xeroxed material, books on reserve at the library, etc..

Course requirements:

- (i) Regular attendance. (If you are obliged to miss a class, let me know, preferably in advance; if there is good reason for your absence, I will try to help you catch up.)
- (ii) Regular reading assignments. I will also assign regular “study questions” on the materials to be read each week. These will not be graded, but will be discussed in class.
- (iii) 2 papers of about 1,500-2,500 words (longer papers will be accepted provided they are not repetitive).
- (iv) final (essay-type) exam.

Grades: 1/3rd each for each of the two papers and the exam. Unexcused absences and late work will be penalized. Extensions on written work will be given only for genuinely serious reasons ("my dog had a headache" doesn't count; nor does "I had other work to do"). I will raise a final grade that is almost-but-not-quite up to a higher letter grade if your class participation indicates that this is warranted (this doesn't mean "if you talk a lot," but "if your class participation indicates that you deserve the higher grade").

(Tentative) Schedule:

September 8th: Introduction to pragmatism: the Metaphysical Club; Peirce's and James's versions of the Pragmatic Maxim; pragmatism and pragmaticism.

September 15th: Peirce's critique of Descartes; theory of inquiry; phenomenology; definitions of truth and reality.

September 22nd: Peirce: philosophy as scientific; conception of metaphysics; logic; the universal categories.

September 29th: Peirce: synechism; agapism; tychism; objective idealism.

October 6th: James on meaning and truth; the Will to Believe.

October 13th James on metaphysics; nominalism; the “pluralistic universe”; “radical empiricism.”

October 20th: **first paper due.** James's moral philosophy.

October 27th: Dewey on truth, inquiry, and reality.

November 3rd: Dewey on philosophy of education; epistemic virtues; aesthetics.

November 10th: Dewey on moral philosophy; philosophy and democracy.

November 17th: Mead: society, mind, and self; moral reasoning.

November 24th: Rorty's neo-pragmatism: philosophy as "just a kind of writing"; truth as consensus.

December 1st: Pragmatist legal theory from Holmes to Posner

December 5th: **second paper due**

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First paper, due in class Monday October 27th. (I am willing to look at one draft per student, provided I receive it by 4:30 p.m., October 17th.) Late work will be penalized; extensions will be given only for genuinely serious reasons.

Ca. 2,500 words on one of the following topics, OR on some other topic in Peirce's philosophy (e.g., Peirce's analysis of the Strengthened Liar Paradox, his contributions to logic, his categories). Please clear your topic with me if it isn't one of those set. Longer papers will be accepted; but I won't be impressed by the fact that a paper is long if it is repetitive or just plain long-winded!

You should aim to explain Peirce's view on the topic you choose as clearly as possible, to support your interpretation by quotations from Peirce as appropriate, and to give arguments either in favor of the view explained, or against it – or, more subtly, to spell out its strengths and its weaknesses. If you are just plain baffled by something, it is better to say so and explain why than to paper over the cracks. You may find it helpful to begin with an opening paragraph which says: this is what I am going to argue for, and this is the route I shall take – and then DO IT. Strive for clarity and organization; elegance is nice, but not the primary concern in this kind of writing (remember Peirce on soldiers' scarlet uniforms!). When you give quotations from Peirce, always give the date (and, when you are quoting from the *Collected Papers*, volume and paragraph number). Supply a full bibliography of any materials you use.

Your paper should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper, stapled. Please put your name and honor declaration (“On my honor, I have received no improper help on this paper”) ON THE BACK of the last page, not on the front of the paper.

All work must be your own; my policy is zero tolerance for plagiarism. If you have taken an idea from someone else, their name should be in the text – not buried in a footnote! – and a proper reference provided. If you are in doubt about what to acknowledge, err on the side of generosity.

1. "Some philosophers have imagined that to start an inquiry it was only necessary to utter a question or set it down on paper, and have even recommend us to begin our studies with questioning everything! But the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief. There must be real and living doubt ..." (from "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) *Pragmatism, Old and New*, p.115). Explain and assess *either* Peirce's critique of Descartes, *or* his own doubt-belief theory of inquiry.

Obviously, to answer the first part, you will need to look at Peirce's 1868 anti-Cartesian papers (CP 5.213-317; the second, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," is reprinted in

Pragmatism, Old and New); and at Descartes' *Meditations*, especially the first.

2. "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real" (from "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878), *Pragmatism, Old and New*, p.147). Explain Peirce's account of truth and reality, and how this relates to the Pragmatic Maxim of Meaning. Does he have a satisfactory solution to the Problem of Buried Secrets?

You should look not only at "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" but also at what Peirce says about truth in "The Fixation of Belief" and what he says about reality in "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities."

3. "Instead of merely jeering at metaphysics, like other prope-positivists, ... the pragmatist extracts from it a precious essence, which will serve to give light and life to cosmology and physics" (CP 5.423 (1902)). Carefully explain and assess *either* Peirce's conception of "scientific metaphysics," *or* any one of his specific metaphysical ideas: synechism, agapism, tychism, objective idealism, "extreme scholastic realism," the "Neglected Argument for the Reality of God."

"The Backward State of Metaphysics" (assembled from papers of 1893 and c. 1903) is in *Pragmatism, Old and New*, pp.169-76; as is "The Categories" (1903), pp.177-208. Vol. 6 of the *Collected Papers* is devoted to "scientific metaphysics"; to answer the second part of the question, you will need to look at whatever is most relevant – use the Table of Contents and the index.

A file of related material is available from my secretary, Beth Hanson, on the 3rd floor of the Law Library. (Please find what you need and xerox it, so that other people can also use these materials.) Also look in De Waal's book; but don't let this be a substitute for thinking things through yourself. Of course, you may use other material as well; but it's almost always better to spend time reading Peirce, and thinking about what he says, than to spend too much time on secondary literature.

Paper Instructions

Papers should be handed to me at the beginning of class on October 27th. Before you hand your paper in:

Spell-check *and* proof-read – on paper! (I will penalize you if it is clear you have not done this.)

Put your name and honor declaration on the back of the paper; on the front, write either “U” (for “undergraduate”) or “G” (for “graduate student”). I will read the two groups of papers separately, beginning with the undergraduates.

Number the pages (I prefer top right), and staple them together, making sure they are all there, and in the right order.

Make sure you have included a proper bibliography of materials used, and dated all Peirce quotations.

Offset quotations should be single-spaced; there is no need to enclose them in quotation marks.

Shorter quotations included in the text should be in quotation marks. Any elisions should be indicated by “... .” Make sure the grammar of the sentence, including the quotation, is correct. If you need to adjust an author’s capitalization to do this, here’s how:

“[T]he” (if replacing author’s lower case by your upper case)

... “[t]he ... “ (if replacing author’s upper case by your lower case).

Please remember: “critique” is a noun, not a verb; “quote” is a verb, not a noun!

Prefer shorter words to longer ones, e.g. “on” to “upon,” “in” to “within,” “among” to “amongst,” “while” to “whilst”; Anglo-Saxon to Latinate words; active to passive constructions.

Avoid: journalistic phrases (e.g., that horrid “the mayor’s finance committee’s memo” construction); police-report jargon (“proceeds to,” “an individual”); and all prefabricated, clichéd words and phrases (“quantum leap,” “paradigm shift”)

Here are some proof-reader's marks and other abbreviations I shall use:

- ✓ yes, correct, good point
- ✗ no, flat-out mistake
- ~~~~ flabby writing: vague, meandering, evasive, relying on prefabricated phrases or words
- E English is incorrect (e.g., verb and subject don't agree in number)
- sp spelling is wrong
- ↵ transpose (change word order)
- ^ something is missing
- || start a new paragraph
- ~~_____~~ delete (words or phrases or sentences or paragraphs struck through)
- rep repetitious

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Second paper, to be handed in to my secretary, Beth Hanson (3rd floor, Law Library) by 4:30 p.m. on the last day of classes, December 5th. Around 2,500 words on one of the following topics, or on another relevant topic agreed with me ahead of time. Presentation instructions: as for first paper.

I am willing to look at one draft per person; drafts should be submitted (to me or Beth) by 4:30 on November 21st.

NB: it is preferable to base your work on the original texts; go to secondary sources only if you are lost – and, of course, be aware that they may not be 100% (or even 50%!) reliable.

(1) Clifford's "Ethics of Belief" and James's "Will to Believe."

Essential reading: James, "The Will to Believe" (in *Pragmatism, Old and New*); Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" (in James file).

Secondary reading: if you are lost, try Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1982), chap.5; and Suckiel, *Heaven's Champion* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1996), chap.1.

(2) Rorty's interpretation of James as holding that "truth is not the sort of thing we should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about."

Essential Reading: James, "What Pragmatism Means" and "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" in *Pragmatism, Old and New*. You might also want to look at James's *The Meaning of Truth* (1909; Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1975). Richard Rorty, Introduction to *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1982).

Secondary reading: if you are lost, try Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, chap.6; Israel Scheffler, *Four Pragmatists* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), part II, especially chapters II-IV; Haack, "Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig," in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

(3a) Dewey's critique of the "quest for certainty" and "the spectator theory of

knowledge."

Essential reading: Dewey, "The Quest for Certainty" in *Pragmatism, Old and New*. Plato, *Republic*, Books 5 and 6.

Secondary reading: if you are lost, try Dicker, Georges, *Dewey's Theory of Knowing* (Philadelphia: University City Science Center, 1976); Tiles, J., *Dewey* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, chap. 5.

OR:

(3b) Compare Dewey's critique of the spectator theory with Rorty's repudiation of epistemology.

Essential reading: Dewey, "The Quest for Certainty" in *Pragmatism, Old and New*. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979), part II.

Secondary reading: if you are lost, try Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), chap.9, section I and pp.201-2; and the last two chapters of de Waal, *Pragmatism*.

(4a) Dewey's account of the "construction of good."

Essential Reading: Dewey, "The Construction of Good," in *Pragmatism, Old and New*.

OR:

(4b) Compare Dewey's account of the construction of the good with the moral philosophy James offers in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life."

Essential reading: James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," and Dewey, "The Construction of Good," both in *Pragmatism, Old and New*.

(5) Mead's Theory of the "Social Construction of the Self."

Essential reading: Mead, "Mind, Self, and Society" and "The Social Self" in *Pragmatism, Old and New*.

Secondary reading: if you are lost, try De Waal, *Mead* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002);

Scheffler, *Four Pragmatists*, part III, chap.III; Aboulafia, M., *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre and Self-Determination* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1986).

Your paper should include a full bibliography of all material cited. Please put your name and honor declaration on the back of the last page, not on the front; and indicate on the front of the paper whether you are an undergraduate or a graduate student.

PHI 581 PRAGMATISM – Final Exam

Time allowed: two-and-a-half hours

Put only “U” or “G” on the front of the bluebook; write and sign the honor declaration, and PRINT your name, on the back cover.

Answer 4 questions, one from each section. Avoid repeating material from your papers. Allow yourself time to read carefully, and to think before you write.

With each quotation you choose:

(i) say what you take the author to be saying;

(ii) explain how it fits into the thought of the author concerned (and, if appropriate, into pragmatism more generally);

(iii) explain why you think it is true and important, and/or what problems you see with it, and why.

Section I

1. “To satisfy our doubts, ... it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency Such is the method of science .” Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief” (1977).

2. “We may define as real that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be. But, however satisfactory such a definition may be found, it would be a great mistake to suppose that it makes the idea of reality perfectly clear. ... The opinion which is fated to be agreed by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is real. That is how I would explain the real.” Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878).

3. “[I]t is worth trying whether by proceeding modestly, recognizing in metaphysics an observational science, and applying to it the universal methods of such science, without caring one straw what kinds of conclusion we reach ..., but just honestly applying induction and hypothesis, we cannot gain some ground for hoping that the disputes and obscurities of the subject may at last disappear.” Peirce, “The Backward State of Metaphysics” (1898).

Section II

4. “[S]o far as the casuistic question goes, ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day.” James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891).

5. “*Our passionate nature not only may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds... .*” James, “The Will to Believe” (1896).

6. “Pragmatism ... asks its usual question: ‘Grant an idea or belief to be true,’ it says, ‘what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?’ The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *True ideas are those ideas that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we can not.*” James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” (1907).

Section III

7. “Special theories of knowledge differ enormously from one another. Their quarrels with one another fill the air. The din thus created makes us deaf to the way in which they all say one thing in common. ... [T]hey all make one common assumption. They all hold that the operation of inquiry excludes any element of practical activity that enters into the construction of the object known.” Dewey, “The Quest for Certainty” (1929).

8. “The problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man’s beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life.” Dewey, “The Construction of Good” (1929).

9. “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic experience deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm [The] task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.” Dewey, “Art as Experience” (1934).

Section IV

10. "Mind arises in the social process only when that process as a whole enters into, or is present in, the experience of any one of the given individuals involved in that process. When this occurs the individual becomes self-conscious and has a mind." Mead, "Mind, Self, and Society" (1934).

11. "It is because of the 'I' that we say that we are never fully aware of what we are, that we surprise ourselves by our own action. ... [T]he 'I' in memory is there as the spokesman for the self of the second, or minute, or day ago. As given, it is a 'me,' but it is a 'me' which was the 'I' at an earlier time.. ." Mead, "Mind, Self, and Society" (1934).

12. "... I think it desirable at once to point out and dispel a confusion between morality and law You can see very plainly that a bad man has as much reason as a good one for wishing to avoid an encounter with the public force, and therefore you can see the practical importance of the distinction between morality and the law. ... I take it that no hearer of mine will misinterpret what I have to say as the language of cynicism. The law is the witness and external deposit of our moral life. Its history is the history of the moral development of the race." Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Path of the Law" (1897).