

Pragmatism: Introduction

The word "pragmatism" has both:

* ordinary usages: C19th: officious meddlesomeness; C20th: doing what is expedient (often suggests "unprincipled")

and (our concern)

* a philosophical usage: name of a school of philosophy founded by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and William James (1842-1910), at the "Metaphysical Club" in Cambridge, MA, in the early 1870s. CSP came up with the word, but feared to use it in print for fear of confusion with the ordinary sense; WJ put it into philosophical currency.

Classical pragmatism was less a formal school or movement, or a specific set of doctrines, than a new approach to or method of doing philosophy. Characteristically, pragmatist philosophers:

- (i) looked to the experiential or practical consequences of beliefs;
- (ii) focused on the future rather than the past;
- (iii) stressed fallible inquiry rather than seeking certainty;
- (iv) preferred continua, connections, over sharp dichotomies;
- (v) combined plausible elements of Rationalism and Empiricism.

Classical pragmatism was various in two ways:

(a) benign: different pragmatists tended to focus on different areas of philosophy, e.g.: Peirce in logic, theory of inquiry, metaphysics; James in phil. of religion, psychology; Dewey in phil. of education, politics. Papini: hotel metaphor.

(b) potentially confusing: different pragmatists gave pragmatism different interpretations; e.g., from the beginning CSP and WJ understood the Pragmatic Maxim of Meaning in significantly different ways.

By 1905, CSP had coined "pragmaticism" for his version. Lovejoy complained there were "thirteen pragmatisms," & no real commonality. Today, Mounce, Rescher, etc. suggest that there is a *good* and a *bad* version.

SH: contemporary pragmatism and neo-pragmatism includes: (i) some variants building on the classical pragmatist tradition of reformed, scientific philosophy; (ii) two forms of radical neo-pragmatism, the literary (e.g., Richard Rorty, Louis Menand), and the scientific (e.g. Stich, Churchland); (iii) various neo-analytic kidnapping attempts (e.g., Brandom et al.). Telephone joke.

Peirce's Account of "Scientific Method"

(1) CSP's account of the "fixation of belief"

— belief as habit of action; doubt as interrupted belief, uncomfortable; inquiry as homeostatic process aimed at settling belief.

— 4 methods of settling belief (only the last 2 are really methods of inquiry):

- method of tenacity (pick a belief and stick to it, don't listen to contrary evidence)
- method of authority (state or church determines what people should believe, and enforces by censorship, punishment of dissidents)
- A Priori method (figure out what is "agreeable to reason"; this is the traditional method of metaphysics)
- the scientific method (the method of experience and reasoning, used by the special sciences, should also be the method of philosophy)

Of these, CSP argues, only the scientific method can yield permanently fixed belief, because it is determined by an "external permanency," which doesn't depend on how anyone believes it to be, i.e. the real world.

Hence his pragmatist definitions of truth and reality:

truth = the opinion that would be agreed were inquiry to continue indefinitely (the "Final" or "Ultimate" Opinion)

reality = the object of the Final Opinion

NB: the role of the cognitive community in all this (CSP anticipates what is now known as "social epistemology," as well as "epistemology naturalized" – only in subtler forms).

The Problem of "Buried Secrets" is the most serious objection to this account of truth (as CSP himself acknowledges):

surely it is either true or else false that there were exactly n dinosaurs at the time

they became extinct; yet it may be forever impossible to figure out from here, in which case CSP would have to say the proposition has no truth-value.

(2) CSP's Critical Common-sensism:

— *historically*, the term alludes to two important responses to Hume's skeptical philosophy:

- Thomas Reid's (the Scottish School of Common-Sense)
- Kant's Critical Philosophy

CSP believes you can combine the best elements of each, while acknowledging:

(a) that Reid is too willing to accept any common-sense belief at face value, rather than acknowledging that such beliefs are almost always vague, and generally likelier to be true when they concern matters of survival

(b) that Kant is too committed to the A Priori method, and his concept of the Thing-in-Itself is pragmatically meaningless

— *philosophically*, the term refers to a conception of science (i.e., genuine, good-faith inquiry) as starting from common-sense beliefs but subjecting them to critical scrutiny, refinement, and testing, via the method of experience and reasoning.

There is a certain affinity to Descartes' Method of Doubt, but also significant differences: Critical Common-Sensism requires "feigned hesitancy," i.e., asking yourself "if this proposition were false, what would show it to be false?" and then looking for evidence to check it out. This is not "living doubt," i.e., interruption of formerly settled belief by some recalcitrant experience, it is not the pretended universal doubt which (CSP thinks) Descartes' method calls for, either.

(3) CSP's conception of experience:

"experience" is understood broadly, to include:

(1) sensory experience

(2) introspective experience (inc. the peculiar kind CSP thinks is involved in mathematical reasoning, which he takes to be essentially diagrammatic, and to involve experimentation on imagined diagrams).

CSP's account of perception combines both realist and fallibilist elements. It culminates around 1902, which is when he introduces the term "percipuum," to mean the combination of:

(a) a percept (e.g., my seeing a yellow flower)

(b) a perceptual judgment (e.g. that this is yellow)

The two are conceptually distinct, CSP says, though they are phenomenologically indistinguishable (i.e, we open our eyes and look, and it seems as if we just "*see that* the flower is yellow").

- *the realist element:* the percept is not a judgment, and not propositional, but an interaction with something in the external world, an event; hence, it is neither true nor false, neither fallible nor infallible. It has some phenomenal quality (seeing a red thing is unlike seeing a yellow thing), but it is interaction with things, not images or sense-data. THIS REALIST ELEMENT ANCHORS THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD IN THE REAL WORLD.
- *the fallibilist element:* the perceptual judgment is propositional, hence either true or false; and it is fallible. We may misinterpret, mis-take, what we perceive.

The difference between hallucination and genuine perception, according to CSP, is that while hallucinations

- may be phenomenally indistinguishable from perceptions
- may be as insistent as perceptions
- may be shared by several people

the behavior of their objects is not predictable by natural law.

(4) CSP's account of reasoning:

Peirce was an important pioneer of modern symbolic logic (and the first person to describe himself in *Who's Who* as a logician).

- unified propositional and predicate calculus, capable of expressing relations (at which CSP had arrived in 1880, a year after the *Begriffsschrift*, independently of Frege) -- the decisive advance on Aristotelian and Stoic logic
- truth-tables (3-valued truth-tables, 1909)
- modal logic
- diagrammatic logic (the "existential graphs")
- anticipation of the computer (in wiring diagram in letter to Alan Turing)

But, like Aristotle's and unlike Frege's, CSP's conception of logic was broad – "the theory of what is good in the way of reasoning," and not restricted to formal, deductive logic:

(a) it includes what we would now call "philosophy of logic," such as theory of propositions, logical form, etc., analysis of arguments, account of truth, response to the Liar paradox, etc.; and more. By 1902, CSP was identifying logic and semeiotic, the general theory of signs, of representation (of which he was also the pioneer).

(b) it includes theory of non-deductive as well as deductive arguments. CSP holds that the scientific method involves 3 types of reasoning:

ABDUCTION (arriving at a hypothesis that, if true, would explain a puzzling phenomenon)

this requires imagination (like literature), but of "explanations and laws"; there are trillions of hypotheses that would explain if true; the remarkable thing is not that we always guess right -- we usually guess wrong -- but that we are able to guess right often enough (much subtler than subsequent "evolutionary epistemology")

DEDUCTION of the necessary consequences of the hypothesis

INDUCTION (testing how well the consequences stand up to evidence)

and the very possibility of induction depends on the relation between particulars and generals – a metaphysical issue

James on Truth

"But how *can* you be enthusiastic over any view of things which you know to have been partly made by yourself, and which is liable to alter during the next minute? How is any heroic devotion to the ideal of truth possible under such paltry conditions?" -- This is just another of the objections by which the anti-humanists show their own comparatively slack hold on the realities of the situation. If they would only follow the pragmatic method and ask "What is truth known-as? What does its existence stand for in the way of concrete goods?" -- they would see that the name of it is the *Inbegriff* of almost everything that is valuable in our lives. The true is the opposite of whatever is instable, of whatever is practically disappointing, of whatever is useless, of whatever is lying and unreliable, of whatever is unverifiable and unsupported, of whatever is artificial and eccentric, of whatever is unreal in the sense of being of no practical account. [*Meaning of Truth*, 1907, p.48]

... the humanist does not ignore the character of objectivity and independence in truth. [*MT*, p.49]

... if you take satisfactoriness concretely, as something felt by you now, and if, by truth, you mean truth taken abstractly and verified in the long run, you cannot make them equate, for it is notorious that the temporarily satisfactory is often false. Yet at each and every moment, truth for that man is what that man "troweth" at that moment with the maximum possible satisfaction to himself, and similarly, abstract truth, truth verified by the long run, and abstract satisfactoriness, long-run satisfactoriness, coincide. [*MT*, p.54]

Truth is essentially a relation between two things, an idea ... and a reality outside of the idea. ... What *constitutes the relation* known as truth, I now say, is just *the existence in the empirical world of this fundamentum of circumstances surrounding object and idea* ... So long as it exists, and a satisfactory passage through in between the object and the idea is possible, that idea will both *be true*, and will *have been true* of that object, whether fully developed verification has taken place or not. [*MT*, p.91]

My account of truth is realistic. ... The notion of a reality independent of [you or me], taken from ordinary social experience. lies at the base of the pragmatist definition of truth. With some such reality any statement, to be accounted true, must agree. Pragmatism defines "agreeing" to mean certain ways of "working," be they actual or potential. [*MT*, p.117]

The true ... is only the expedient in the way of belief ... expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't

necessarily meet all further experience equally satisfactorily. Experience ... has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas." [*Pragmatism*, 1907, p.106; Haack p.322]

John Dewey (1859-1952) -- "America's philosopher":

Introduction

- not from an "intellectual" background, but a Vermont farming family.
- very broad interests, both within philosophy (from logic to political philosophy) and in education and public affairs.
- early Hegelism, neo-Kantian idealism; later (under the influence of James's *Principles of Psychology* and of Darwin) naturalism.
- influence of Hegel remains throughout his life in his rejection of traditional philosophical dualisms: mind/body; fact/value; subject/object; theory/practice (Morton G. White's "Analytic/Synthetic: An Untenable Dualism" borrows a key phrase from Dewey).
- briefly a student of Peirce's at Hopkins (but decided against taking CSP's logic course, because "the course is very mathematical, and by Logic, Mr. Peirce means only an account of the methods of science, put in mathematical form"); eventually, however, noting Peirce's stress on general experimental phenomena rather than particular experimental results, his high regard for logic, his explicit understanding of the social character of inquiry, and his rejection of the Will to Believe, he came to see Peirce as "more of a Pragmatist than James."
- Dewey often uses the word "instrumentalism" for his brand of Pragmatism; but he doesn't mean "instrumentalism" in the modern sense:

NOT: scientific theories are not true or false statements, but merely instruments, intellectual tools for making observational predictions

BUT: stress on "how thought functions in the experimental determination of future conduct" – > unification of knowledge, conduct, "the application of intelligence".

Philosophy is an intellectual pursuit, and so, like all inquiry, requires respect for fairness, impartiality, consistency, evidence; however, "[t]o say that the object of philosophy is truth is to make a moral statement that applies to every kind of inquiry" – but this doesn't mean that philosophy seeks a special, purely intellectual kind of truth. Its chief task is to

understand "the relation that exists between the beliefs about the nature of things due to natural science to beliefs about values – using that word to describe whatever is taken to have rightful authority in the direction of conduct, to achieve wisdom, not just knowledge.

Dewey's Epistemology

The Quest for Certainty (1929)

- a sustained critique of the "Spectator Theory of Knowledge" (by which Dewey means: theories that think of knowledge by analogy with vision); and an attempt to break down what he sees as an invidious distinction between theory and practice, by means of a more "instrumentalist" approach:
- in the "Spectator Theory" tradition:

THEORY is associated with the intellectual, leisure, upper-class, spirituality, universal, certain, inner, safe – *superior*

PRACTICE is seen as toilsome, associated with slaves and serfs, the material, change, particularity, probability, outer, risky – *inferior*

Historical diagnosis: in Plato and Aristotle there was a rational systematization of religious ideas, eliminating mythical elements, and purifying via logic:

advantage: it created the ideals of reason and science

disadvantage: it glorified the invariant (theoretical) at the expense of the changeable (practical)

As you see very clearly in Plato (according to whom knowledge is of unchangeable Forms, while belief or opinion is of changeable particulars) this tradition gives an *ontological* justification for the depreciation of practice – the quest for certainty determines metaphysics.

Result – there is now a crisis in philosophy: for philosophical doctrines about mind and knowledge, deriving from the pre-scientific, slave-owning culture of ancient Greece, are at odds with the conclusions of science – which is fallibilist through and through; anti-teleological; anti-Forms; etc.

Solution – avoid the split of science/values by:

reconnecting values-action-knowledge

contextualizing knowledge to specific problem-situations.

Special theories of knowledge differ enormously from one another. Their quarrels .. fill the air. The din thus created makes us deaf to the way they all say one thing in common. ... *They all hold that the operation of inquiry excludes any element of practical activity that enters into the construction of the object known* [my italics].

Dewey's theory is *between* rationalism and empiricism: senses/reason aren't competitors for the first rank, but allies; both rationalism and empiricism take an episode in a process and try to make it the foundation of a whole theory of knowledge. In fact:

(i) empiricism is right to say that no amount of ratiocination, without experience, could yield knowledge; BUT experience isn't given, isn't "data" – it is *taken*.

(ii) rationalism is also partly right; BUT we should think in terms of *intelligence*, *judgment*, not Reason, Noûs, intellect.

The "art of knowing" requires skill in:

- (a) selecting sense impressions – analytic observation
- (b) selecting concepts – sifting background beliefs
- (c) conceiving new experiments to get new information

Kantian element: the objects of knowledge aren't pre-existent, but "prospective and eventual," a consequence of directed action; nature *becomes* an object of knowledge as it becomes understood. Dewey repudiates the idea that *we* are puzzled, but *objects* are fixed; instead, thinking = response to "doubtful objects." There is an interaction of subject/object: colored or sonorous objects (secondary qualities, in Locke's terminology); agreeable or unpleasant object (tertiary qualities, in Santayana's terminology).

Peircean element: doubt is uncomfortable, natural men dislike it; but love of security – > dogmatism, premature judgement, wishful thinking. The disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic.

The place of the sciences: we shouldn't be too rigid about the definition of "science" – there is nothing fixed or final to define; it is best to think of science as simply "the reflective conclusion of competent methods," noting that it ranges from astronomy – which is highly rigorous, but with respect to a very limited range of questions, to the social sciences – which are concerned with a vast range of questions, and therefore less rigorous (if we simplify, we eliminate the human). These involve different methods, but not different kinds of reality.

Science depends ultimately on experience, and yes, the senses are fallible; but for science

this is (not an insuperable difficulty. but) a problem to be solved by instruments. In science, experience is *active* and *experimental* – it involves *doing*; it is *not random but designed*. This requires revision of the ancient Greek conception of knowledge to accommodate "experimental thinking."

Dewey's Political Philosophy

Why Philosophy and Democracy, any more than Chemistry and Oligarchy, Mathematics and Aristocracy, Astronomy and Monarchy? Is not the concern of philosophy with truth, and can truth vary with political institutions any more than with degrees of latitude and meridians of longitude? Is there one ultimate reality for men who live where suffrage is universal and another and different reality where limited suffrage prevails? If we should become a socialist republic next week would that modify the nature of the absolutes and ultimates with which philosophy deals any more than it would affect the principles of arithmetic or the laws of physics? – Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy" (1919).

[Don't forget the connection between epistemology/political philosophy in Plato – which is never far from Dewey's mind. Classifying types of government not in terms of processes, procedures, institutions but in terms of the kind of person who rules, Plato argues that the best kind of government is government by the best people, those most suited to rule; these are the philosopher-kings (and queens?), for only they have genuine knowledge of the good, that is, have "seen" the Form of Goodness.]

Acc. to Dewey, the idea that there can be *no* connection between philosophy and democracy (expressed in the rhetorical questions in the quotation above) rests on the assumptions:

- (i) that philosophy is a kind of science, aiming at apprehension of a certain class of truths;
- (ii) that it differs from the "special" sciences in virtue of seeking a more complete and deeper truth.

These assumptions are both part of many philosophers' conception of their enterprise, and also part of many critics' complaints that, unlike the special sciences, the history of philosophy is a history of endless disputation with no real results.

But it is a mistake to think of phil. as seeking knowledge, like scientific knowledge but of "ultimate reality." The goal of philosophy is wisdom; it is "an aspiration subjected to rational discriminations and tests"– "a sense for the better kind of life to be led." It must be *based on* knowledge, if it is to be reasonable persuasion rather than mere passion. But it is right and proper that philosophy differs in different times and places; e.g., in agrarian and industrial societies. It would be different again (Dewey believes) if women did it.

There has been an approximate coincidence between the growth of modern science and of democracy. Is this *mere* coincidence, or something more? Does nature itself support democratic hopes? The world is "tolerant," but supports some social arrangements better than others.

(1) Thinking of democracy in terms of "liberty, equality, fraternity":

- * liberty: universe which is open to change and contingency; not everything succeeds as planned!

- * equality: avoid the "metaphysics of feudalism," ultimate reality knowable only by an elite; no grades of reality.

- * fraternity: democracy should involve, not atomistic (or "ragged") individualism, which tends to fragmentation, but the associations and interdependencies that enrich the lives of individuals.

(2) Thinking of democracy in terms of institutions and procedures, we see that:

- * many *undemocratic* societies adopt the word "democracy" because of the favorable connotations it carries. We need to be aware that not all self-described "democratic" societies are truly such; e.g., if there are elections but only one candidate, or if those who vote the "wrong" way will be penalized.

- * even societies that are structurally democratic (in terms of free elections, universal suffrage, etc.) aren't truly democratic unless the way consensus is formed is consonant with democratic ideals – which requires unforced and informed agreement, not consensus via deception, bribery, rabble-rousing, threats.

- * this is why education is so important to democracy; with an illiterate or uneducated electorate, the desirable kind of consensus is impossible.

- * one of the most important goals of education, in fact, is preparation for citizenship.

Some questions: How would Peirce respond to Dewey's conception of what philosophy is? How does Plato's conception of democracy differ from Dewey's? How would you

define "democracy"? Might the concept be gradational rather than categorical? (Was Switzerland a democracy before women got the vote?) How could one "test" (as Dewey says) whether the world "supports" democracy better than other forms of government? Has Dewey responded adequately to the rhetorical questions he himself posed at the outset?