

PRAGMATISM

From Progressivism to Postmodernism

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General Introduction

David Depew and Robert Hollinger

Pragmatism has become popular again. It has become so popular, in fact, that everyone seems to know what it is. In keeping with pragmatism's antiessentialist spirit, however, we should recognize that from its earliest days pragmatism has meant many things to many people. Only a year after William James's influential 1907 lectures on pragmatism, Arthur O. Lovejoy was able to discriminate thirteen distinct meanings for the term.¹ Since then, every subsequent rebirth of pragmatism has generated more views about it. Indeed, having been given new currency by Richard Rorty, the term *pragmatism* is now being bandied about in so many ways that Lovejoy, were he alive today, would be cast into paroxysms of *Schadenfreude*.

We say *Schadenfreude* because Lovejoy regarded pragmatism's dissemination of meaning as *ipso facto* a condemnation of it. Like other professionalizing philosophers, Lovejoy believed that if philosophy was to make as much progress as science, it would have to trade in sober, unambiguous, technical meanings. By contrast, the editors of this volume, and many of the intellectual historians and historically sensitive philosophers who have contributed to it, are not as sour as Lovejoy was about plural meanings. On the contrary, we are generally in sympathy with pragmatism's tendency to let a thousand semantic flowers bloom. But for this very reason most of us do not believe that taking a pragmatic view of history grants to one's present interests or one's prospective hopes unlimited license to reshape the past, especially the past of one's own intellectual filiation. If pragmatism's present condition is to be properly assessed and if its future prospects are to be realized, no good will come from retrospectively prescribing to diverse people living in diverse times what they must have meant.

It is simply not pragmatic to believe that there is a pragmatism that rides serenely over these differing circumstances.

If the arguments of pragmatists, and the consequences they draw from them, have differed wildly, it is nonetheless true that pragmatists share a number of characteristic attitudes, which they explicate, justify, and commend in different ways. Pragmatists have a suspicious attitude, for example, toward the epistemological and ontological problems that have virtually defined the philosophical tradition, which have made of skepticism a constantly looming threat. Accordingly, it is important to recognize that when they claim that ideas derive their meaning, and even get their truth, wholly from their utility in guiding behavior, pragmatists do not wish to cast doubt on our ability to know things. For pragmatists, meaning, truth, and knowledge are not scarce. On the contrary, they are ubiquitous. This is because pragmatists are viscerally convinced that overly objectivistic, or “foundationalist,” epistemological criteria are, by their very unfulfillability, the main cause of the skeptical temptations into which philosophers regularly fall. Pragmatists say that such criteria are incoherent and irrelevant. No reasonable person has any cause to be disappointed if it turns out that their conditions cannot be met.

One way to defend this intuition is to stress the primacy of action over contemplation in the cognitive efforts of humans. This is another characteristically pragmatic attitude. If *praxis* is primary, knowledge abounds whenever and wherever people cooperatively do and make things. Only to isolated, passive thumbsuckers does it seem hard to come by. For this reason, pragmatists deny that philosophical contemplation can furnish a separate kind of knowledge above and beyond what we learn as inquiring animals situated in an interactive cultural environment. They also affirm that ordinary people are capable of running their own lives, and improving the lives of others, because the cognitively rich skills and experience they come to possess can never be eclipsed by the arcane *gnosis* of this or that priestly caste. In stressing the primacy of *praxis* over *theoria*, accordingly, pragmatism shows itself to be more than an epistemological stance. It is also an attitude about values and purposes. The epistemic permissiveness of the pragmatic tradition, and the active, this-worldly, democratic perspective from which pragmatism speaks, is intended to blunt the moral, social, and political passivity, cynicism, even nihilism, that seem so often to accompany epistemic cramp. It is intended to unleash a sense of freedom, autonomy, novelty, and progress. If there is any respect in which pragmatism is a characteristically American doctrine, this is it. Indeed, following its career in America is a good way of investigating how knowledge and power have been intertwined in this country throughout the twentieth century.

From this perspective the history of American pragmatism can usefully be divided into three periods. In the first period, classical pragmatism became linked to the diffuse social and political movements known as progressivism. This link was formed, on the epistemological side, by what John Dewey called “the influence of Darwinism on philosophy.” On the assumption that evolu-

tionary theory shows mind to be a collection of adaptive traits, which enable humans to get around in the world, pragmatists as different as James, George Herbert Mead, and Dewey conceived of personal development as adaptive behavior within a cultural environment, and of social, political, and economic reform as ameliorative human ecology. In this way, pragmatism helped America pass from unregulated forms of capitalism to more regulated versions.

A second phase of American pragmatism began when sophisticated advocates of logical positivism or logical empiricist views about philosophy, scientific method, and social engineering began arriving in America in flight from Nazi tyranny in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Positivists like Rudolf Carnap and American pragmatists like Charles Morris felt immediately that they had much in common. Pragmatists agreed, for example, that their own notion of meaning as the “cash value” of an idea was a crude first approximation to the positivists’ “verificationist” theory of meaning, according to which a proposition that cannot possibly be judged true or false has no clear meaning. In the course of clarifying this notion, Carnap, and after him W.V.O. Quine, took what they both described as a pragmatic turn. No amount of information can determine which of the many conceptual and theoretical frameworks we use to interpret our experience is better or truer apart from our purposes and problems. The proof of conceptual schemes is entirely in the pudding. They are to be judged pragmatically.

In both of these phases, pragmatists took a commendatory view of the natural sciences, the experimentalism of which contrasted vividly with the priestly ideal of knowledge as passive contemplation. At the same time, the pragmatists’ positive attitude toward the benefits of scientific method in an experimentalist culture pointed to an ambiguity that has dogged them from the outset. Do pragmatists, and progressives, advocate enhanced participatory democracy or technocratic social engineering? Are they populists or elitists? To this disputed question the authors in this volume repeatedly return. The issue had already been raised in the 1920s, when Randolph Bourne, a former disciple of Dewey, Lewis Mumford, and others, adopted a more critical stance toward capitalist democracy than most pragmatists, as well as a more highly aestheticized sense of the lifeworld, and, from this perspective, attacked Dewey’s “pragmatic acquiescence” to “Wilson’s War.” In this matter, Dewey was not without ways of defending himself. When he gave ground, moreover, it was generally by moving toward Bourne’s and Mumford’s values. Yet, to Dewey’s dismay, the positivists’ infusion of markedly scientific attitudes into the pragmatic tradition subsequently tilted pragmatism’s sense of itself toward the technocratic and away from the communal and the aesthetic. In an atmosphere dominated by World War II, the Cold War, the emergence of a national security state, the ascendancy of managerial capitalism, and consumerist conceptions of the good life, behaviorist views about human motives were combined with ideas about how capitalistic economics could be rationalized in ways that displaced the public-minded, participatory ideals of earlier progressive pragmatists, and put in

