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## *Pragmatism*

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Pragmatism is the distinctive contribution of American thought to philosophy. It is a movement that attracted much attention in the early part of the twentieth-century, went into decline, and reemerged in the last part of the century. Part of the difficulty in defining pragmatism is that misconceptions of what pragmatism means have abounded since its beginning, and continue in today's "neopragmatism."

Pragmatism is a method of philosophy begun by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), popularized by William James (1842-1910), and associated with two other major early representatives, John Dewey (1859-1952) and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). Pragmatism was defined in 1878 by Peirce as follows: "Consider 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" (Peirce, 1992: 132).

William James's book, *Pragmatism* (1907), gathered together lectures he had been giving on the subject since 1898 and launched a much broader interest in pragmatism and also controversy concerning what the philosophy means. Most early critics took James as the representative of pragmatism, yet Peirce claimed that James misunderstood his definition in holding the meaning of a concept to be

the actual conduct it produces rather than the conceivable conduct. Early European critics such as Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim, and Max Horkheimer took pragmatism to be an example of an American mentality which reduced truth to mere expediency, to what James unfortunately once expressed as “the cash value of an act.” There has also been a tendency to confuse the philosophy with the everyday meaning of the word “pragmatic” as expedient, yet Peirce, citing Kant, was careful to distinguish “pragmatic” from “practical.”

### **Pragmatic or Practical?**

James was interested in the experiencing individual, for whom practical events marked the test of ideas. As he put it in *Pragmatism*: “The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one” (James, 1977: 379). Philosophy is taken by James to be a means for practical life, whereas for Peirce, pragmatism was a method for attaining clarity of ideas within a normative conception of logic, that is, within the norms of continuing, self-correcting inquiry directed toward truth. Logical meaning, for Peirce, is not found in “definite instants of our life,” but in the context of the community of self-correcting inquiry. And truth is that opinion the community would reach, given sufficient inquiry, and which is known fallibly by individuals.

The earliest roots of pragmatism are to be found in the remarkable series of papers from around 1868, published when Peirce was 29 years old. In “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” and its four denials of Cartesianism, he

destroyed the Cartesian foundations of modern philosophy. Against Descartes' attempt to base science on the indubitable foundations of immediate knowledge, Peirce argued that we have no powers of *introspection* or of *intuition*, using these terms in their technical logical sense as meaning direct, unmediated, dyadic knowledge. Cognitions are instead determined by previous cognitions, and all cognitions are inferences or mediate signs which, in turn, address interpreting signs. The possibility of scientific truth does not derive from indubitable foundations, but by the self-correcting process of interpretation. Peirce, who rejected foundationalism, proposed a regulative ideal of an unlimited community of inquirers, capable of inquiry into the indefinite future as a basis for fallible, objective knowledge. It is within this context of a general community of interpretation that the "conceivable consequences" of pragmatic meaning are to be found.

Peirce's pragmatism must be understood within his conceptions of semeiotic (doctrine of signs) and of inquiry, as must his separation of it from practical life. Peirce differed from the other pragmatists in keeping theory separate from practice, not out of elitism, but because in this master scientist's view, the scientific method is not vital enough to run society or one's individual life. In his view practical decisions often need to be based on beliefs and "gut" feelings which produce the "definite difference" of James, whereas theoretical life can only be based on fallible *opinions*, always subject to correction within the unlimited community of inquiry. Pragmatic meaning is found, as he put it

elsewhere, not in a particular experiment, but in *experimental phenomena*, not in “any particular event that did happen to somebody in the dead past, but what *surely will* happen to everybody in the living future who shall fulfill certain conditions” (Peirce, 1938: Vol. 5 Para. 425).

The term “conceivable” marks the difference between Peirce’s and James’s pragmatic maxims. In reducing Peirce’s “conceivable consequences” to consequences, James seemed not to understand why conceivable consequences are not exhausted by actual instances, and why “pragmatic,” in the philosophical sense, is very different from “practical,” in the everyday sense.

What works today, in a practical sense, may not work tomorrow, and may not work tomorrow because conceivable consequences not yet actualized today came to fruition, and may yet come to further fruition. “Ye may know them by their fruits,” is pragmatic, when one considers those fruits as conceivable consequences, capable of further fruition, that is, as general.

The pragmatic meaning of a stop sign is that it will determine consequences in general, and not simply the individual autos which stop. It is also the autos which would stop, that is, the conceivable consequences. For these reasons, Peirce attempted to distinguish his own original version of pragmatism from the one James popularized and which others, such as F.C.S. Schiller and Giovanni Papini, drew their own versions from. So he re-named his original version “pragmaticism,” a term, he added, “ugly enough to be safe from kidnapers.”

### **Pragmatism as General Outlook**

Peirce and James first met as students at Harvard University, yet neither held Ph.D.s. Peirce had a master's degree in Chemistry and James received an M.D. John Dewey received one of the first Ph.D.s in philosophy in the United States from Johns Hopkins University in 1884, where he studied briefly with Peirce. Dewey met Mead, who received a Ph.D. from Harvard, when they taught briefly at the University of Michigan, and a few years later, after being named chairman of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Chicago, brought Mead there. Late in his life, penniless, Peirce added a middle name of "Santiago"--St. James--in thanks to a fund James put together on his behalf.

One sees a broad range of topics in the writings of these four "classic" pragmatists, in contrast to the growing demands for technical "specialization" that marked the course of academic philosophy. But when these early pragmatists are invoked it is usually not only for their particular doctrines of pragmatism, but rather their larger philosophical outlooks in general that are included as "pragmatist thought," and which do share some similarities. So the term pragmatism is often used to describe the broader philosophical movement including Peirce's doctrine of signs, Dewey's philosophy of "instrumentalism," and Mead's developmental model of the self.

Pragmatism in general was an attempt to undercut the Cartesian-Kantian problem of starting with a subject and an object and then figuring out how to put them together. It denied that knowledge was reducible either to a knowing subject

or to an immediate sensation of an object, thus rejecting rationalism and the sensationalism of British empiricism. Pragmatism denied the myth of a private and asocially constituted subject or object by locating meaning in the vital tissue of the generalized community. It began instead with triadic mediated sign-acts, from which could be prescinded a “subject” and an “object.” Objectivity is thus thoroughly social and mediate, rather than individual and immediate.

Though James may have been short on philosophical rigor, his writings brimmed with ideas and vigor. In *Pragmatism*, for example, he set out in the opening chapter his distinction between *tough-minded* and *tender-minded* outlooks. In his *Principles of Psychology* he coined the term “stream of consciousness,” and he developed the idea of “The Moral Equivalent of War” in the 1910 an essay of that title, a mobilization for a kind of peace corps.

In his later work, James developed his philosophy in *The Will to Believe*, in which truth again is viewed from the experiencing individual, and in *A Pluralistic Universe*, where he emphasized multiple perspectives over a “monistic” theory of truth. Against what he saw as a “block universe” in idealism, James argued for a pluralistic and open-ended universe that would allow for the qualitative uniqueness of experience.

All four pragmatists carved out phenomenological aspects of their theories. Peirce literally founded a phenomenology around the same time as Edmund Husserl, though he settled on the term “phaneroscopy” to avoid confusing it with Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. James began with the

phenomenon of religious experience rather than belief or authority in his study of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Qualitative immediacy is an element of communicative conduct in Dewey's and Mead's theories of aesthetic experience, of the problematic situation, of Mead's discussions of the place of emergence and novelty, and of his work *The Philosophy of the Present*, of Peirce and Dewey's discussions of the first stage of inquiry--Peirce's "abductive inference" and Dewey's "problem finding," and of Peirce, James and Mead's discussions of the "I" as an element of the "I" "me" internal dialogue that constitutes thought.

James and Dewey, the chief public spokesmen for pragmatism, were also powerful manifestations of the modernist impulse in the early twentieth-century. Their ardent optimism, pluralism, and situationalism showed new ways to reconceive mind as vitally continuous with nature, experience, and conduct. Dewey was the most widely known public philosopher in America in the first half of the twentieth-century, and social reform was a central preoccupation of his public philosophy. He had become associated with Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr and their social settlement The Hull House in the 1890s, which they founded in Chicago shortly before Dewey arrived there. Mead shared Dewey's interests in social reform and the possibilities for reconstructing democratic life in America. Though his work was hardly known outside academic circles, Mead became a mainstay in sociology, even as Dewey's reputation went with pragmatism into eclipse in mid-century philosophy. Through his student Herbert Blumer, philosopher and social psychologist Mead became a representative of "Chicago

sociology” and what Blumer termed “symbolic interactionism.”

It should be noted that all four pragmatists were active as psychologists: Peirce and James were active in experimental psychology, and Dewey and Mead were interested in developmental psychology, and specifically in the “genetic epistemology” movement in America in the 1890s and on. Dewey published a key functional psychology article in 1896, “The Reflex Arc in Psychology.” There he argued that the stimulus-response arc model needed to be reconceived functionally as a “circuit, a continual reconstitution,” rather than an arc, in which both stimulus and response occur within a mediating organic coordination rather than as only externally related. This kind of argument reappears in his later turn to the context of the situation, and in his late view of meaning as transaction.

Mead is perhaps most known to sociologists for his developmental theory of the self, which involves a progressive internalization of the other, beginning in a "conversation of gestures," through a level of “play” involving specific others, and culminating in a "generalized other," an inner representation of community who is "me" in that internal dialogue of "I" and "me" which comprises the self of self-consciousness. In Mead's view, it is the internalized “attitudes” and values of the community, and not only a specific role model, which mark the fully developed human self.

The human ability to engage in gestural conversations retains its preconscious animal sensing and emotional communicative origins, while yet embedded in the inner representation of social life that is the generalized other.

Mead termed this representation “the significant symbol,” which is a gesture, sign, or word simultaneously addressed to the self and another individual.

Communicative mind is a semeiotic process for Mead and the other pragmatists, involving neural processes, though not reducible to them. Mind is viewed not as internal to the brain, but as in transaction with its environment. Mind, as the communicative organ of the self, involves the further interpretations and pragmatic consequences it engenders.

### **Eclipse and Re-Emergence**

Part of the confusion over pragmatism has to do with the peculiar history of thought in the twentieth-century, as philosophy became institutionalized in American universities, and as scientific modernism swept away American philosophy. Though he was Mead’s former student and editor of the publication of Mead’s lectures, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Charles Morris believed that logical positivism and its claim to dyadic knowledge based in “thing-sentences” (or semantic reference) provided philosophical foundations more scientific than pragmatism. The open-ended Chicago pragmatism of Dewey and Mead, centering on the human being within a live social environment--a human capable of criticism, cultivation, emergence, and continued growth in the community of interpretation--was replaced in the 1930s at the University of Chicago by the closed positivist dream of the completion of philosophy personified by Morris and Viennese refugee Rudolph Carnap, and later by the even more stringent technicalism of analytic philosophy that in turn replaced positivism.

In his 1938 monograph, *Foundations of a Theory of Signs*, Morris systematically reduced Peirce's triadic view of signs to a dyadic-based positivism without acknowledgment of Peirce or of Peirce's logical arguments for signs as triadic inferences (as Dewey pointed out in an essay written when he was in his late 80s), although Morris did acknowledge Peirce a couple of decades later. A number of Morris's inverted Peircean semiotic terms, such as "pragmatics," have become institutionalized, despite their reversal of Peirce's definitions. To use Peirce's term pragmatism, and then claim originality for the term "pragmatics" as a specifically semiotical term, without describing the relation of Peirce's pragmatism to semeiotic, or how Morris's view radically departed from the source terms he uses--claiming that it is about "the relations of signs to their users," as though the users are not also signs--amounts to the further "kidnapping" of the meaning of pragmatism.

Philosophical pragmatism resurfaced as a significant part of intellectual life in the last decades of the twentieth century. What had been a body of thought reduced largely to the influence of Mead in academic social science, and passing references to James, Dewey, and Peirce, reemerged with significance for semiotics, philosophy, literary criticism, and other disciplines. There are ongoing collected works projects for all four pragmatists.

James and Dewey's situationally based philosophies now seemed to provide a vital alternative to the narrowly positivist/language analysis world in which academic philosophy had become enclosed in the Anglo-American context.

Strangely enough, Mead's fortunes rose in the 1940s and 1950s in sociology just as his work and that of the other pragmatists were being eclipsed in philosophy. Symbolic interactionism had functioned in mid-century to keep the Meadian stream of pragmatic thought flowing, though it lost sight of the other pragmatists. Now Mead has begun to be taken seriously by philosophers again.

### **Neopragmatism**

Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty are two widely discussed thinkers closely associated with the renewal of interest in pragmatism. Both are heavily influenced by the "linguistic turn"--by the dominant postwar Anglo-American "language analysis" (out of which Rorty in particular derives)--and both are contributors to attempts to link Anglo-American and continental philosophies.

Influenced both by his colleague Karl-Otto Apel's inquiry into Peirce and the tendency of critical theorists, such as Max Horkheimer, to view pragmatism as positivism, Habermas depicted the pragmatisms of Charles Peirce and John Dewey in his early work, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, as having critical potential, yet as ultimately ingredients in the development of modern positivism. He viewed pragmatism from a Kantian and Weberian standpoint as a doctrine of inferential inquiry legitimized by transcendental structures of instrumental action. Habermas missed Peirce's crucial rejection of Kant's transcendental philosophy: to put it tersely in Kantian terms, science is not the "synthesis" of the immediate, as Kant thought, but rather the "analysis" of the mediate, of signs. Habermas also imposed a Weberian concept of strategic, "instrumental action" that was alien to

Peirce's community of interpretation framework and that of the other pragmatists as well, including Dewey's "instrumentalism."

Nevertheless, the explosion of interest in Habermas, in connection with Apel's inquiries, also sparked interest in pragmatism both in Europe and America. Apel, who translated Peirce into German, helped to show how Peirce's rejection of foundationalism had, in effect, transformed Kant's transcendental subject into a "transcendental" unlimited community of inquirers as the limit of knowledge. Apel's reintroduction of the term "transcendental," in its technical sense, to Peirce's philosophy is problematic, since Peirce believed that the pragmatic maxim denied Kant's concept of incognizable things-in-themselves, and thereby the concept of transcendental underpinnings.

Habermas's appreciation of pragmatism grew since those early works, and he attempted to develop a "theory of communicative action," based on a concept of "linguistically generated intersubjectivity" influenced in part by Mead. Although Habermas sought to come to terms with the body of pragmatism as a whole, his theory of communicative action remains grounded in Kantian dichotomies at variance with the pragmatic tradition.

Rorty claims to be a pragmatist influenced by Dewey, as well as such seemingly distant sources as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The pragmatic vision Rorty extols is that of philosophy as conversation instead of a quest for truth or wisdom. In his book *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty depicted pragmatism as a doctrine rooted in a conception of inquiry, but inquiry

as unconstrained conventional conversation.

Rorty's pragmatist bears an uncanny resemblance to the language game approach of later Wittgenstein and his rejection of his early "picture theory of knowledge." The pragmatists also rejected such foundationalism, beginning with Peirce's bold anti-Cartesian articles of the late 1860s and culminating with Dewey and Bentley's *Knowing and the Known* in 1949, but they did so by articulating a fallibilist, experiential model of inquiry which showed, in contrast to Rorty's statement, how the "nature of objects" and the evolutionary biosocial genius of the human mind tempered or constrained inquiry toward truth and "self-knowledge."

Despite Rorty's claim of being a pragmatist, a number of his leading ideas are at odds with pragmatism. Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead were all genuinely interested in exploring the place of biology in human conduct, yet Rorty denies the influence of biology. Peirce, Dewey and Mead developed theories of meaning that involved more than conventional signification, yet Rorty views signs as purely conventional. The four earlier pragmatists all viewed experience as an element of conduct, yet Rorty limits conduct to conventional or contingent meaning, claiming that people are solely products of socialization ("There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them." (Rorty, 1989: 177). Unlike Dewey, Rorty denies continuity between the self and its community.

Finally, pragmatism is at heart a philosophy of purport, yet Rorty's postmodern outlook denies authentic purposiveness, viewing meaning as sets of

conventions. Meaning is simply what one happens to believe, subject to arbitrary “re-descriptions,” and the pragmatic criterion of consequences is undone.

Despite shortcomings in contemporary neopragmatism, the ongoing re-engagement with the earlier pragmatists shows that significant consequences for social theory are still being discovered.

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**Cross-references:** See also Mead, George Herbert; Symbolic Interaction; Habermas, Jürgen; Rorty, Richard; Self

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