

The Pragmatist Theory of the Self*

This will be a brief overview of the pragmatist theory of the self. I will draw primarily on the four major classical pragmatists: Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. Other pragmatist thinkers could also be used, but at this point I want to stay with the four major figures. This essay will be only one way of constructing this theory. Other scholars might well use different ideas and organize them in different ways. There could easily be a dozen ways of writing this essay.

There has not been a great deal written on this topic, though interesting analyses can be found in the writings of James Hoopes, (1989), Eugene Halton, (Rochberg-Halton, 1986), Vincent Colapietro, (1989, 1999), Sandra Rosenthal (1986), Hans Joas (1993), Robert Perinbanayagam (2000) and Margaret Archer (2003) among others.

The pragmatists did not create fully developed theories of the self. They worked with rough-cut approximations, which were often lying in their writings as bits and pieces. Many of Peirce's best ideas on this topic are in his unpublished notes (Colapietro, 1989). Mead's materials are largely student notes from his unpublished lectures. Dewey, who wrote a great deal, wrote little on the express topic of the self, although his paper on the reflex arc was quite important (Dewey, 1896). And James, despite his systematic and lengthy chapter on the self (James 1890, pp. 291-401) left us with a distinctly "divided" self, in both the theoretical and moral senses (Gale,

1999).

I will nevertheless select ideas from each pragmatist and try to fit them together. From Dewey I will take the self as actor or agent, from Mead the social self, from Peirce the semiotic or significative self and from James the emotion of self feeling.

I will proceed by going from Dewey to Mead to Peirce to James, adding concepts as I go along. This is not a chronological order but one that was chosen for the presentation of ideas. There should be an increasing cognitive momentum as the portrait gets filled in. After going through the four pragmatists I will list the overall characteristics of the theory. And then I will have a concluding section. There will be six sections: Part 1 on Dewey, Part 2 on Mead, Part 3 on Peirce, Part 4 on James, Part 5 on Properties of the Overall Theory and Part 6 on the Conclusion.

1. Dewey

Dewey was distinct from the other pragmatists in having a populist, common man style, emphasizing ordinary life, practicality, everyday problems, common sense and the improvement of life for the average person. He was suspicious of theory and analysis, preferring practice and synthesis.

In relation to the self, Dewey emphasized the process of solving problems. This means the aspect of the self that he paid most attention to was practical action or agency. All the pragmatists emphasized practice,

and the term “pragmatism” tips the discourse in that direction. So it makes sense to use Dewey’s agency as the overall framework for the theory of self. Dewey’s idea of agency, however, also had room for pure cognitions or theory, for he recognized that thought could sometimes be relatively distant from goal seeking or practice, even though he himself was disinclined from this type of thinking. Within the overall agentic loop there could be one or more purely cognitive sub-loops. Still he saw agency as the overall framework within which all thought, no matter how abstract, operated.

For Dewey, action or agency has two stages: rehearsal and enactment. He distinguished them as follows: “An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, it’s consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable.” (1930, p. 190). This distinction again opens up the agentic process to a number of early, preparatory stages. People have been known to think for indefinite periods of time before engaging in such actions as getting married or divorced, picking or changing an occupation, going into or out of psychotherapy, actually writing their Ph.D. dissertation, killing themselves, curing themselves, etc.

In rehearsal then we are defining and modelling the act, not executing it. And we are also trying out the choice process to see how it feels. As Dewey says, rehearsing is less committing than action itself, for you can back out of it. You are not morally and legally attached as you are to overt action. In contrast, action is unchangeable. Once we do it, not in our minds but in the external world, it is there forever.

Dewey was especially insightful in examining the first or rehearsal stage. This was a kind of mental experiment where we could try out, imaginatively,

the various options and see which one seemed to work best. As he put it, “Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon. But the trial is in imagination, not in overt fact.” (1930, P. 190).

A good example of Dewey’s distinction between rehearsal and execution can be seen in the boyhood of Herbert Peirce, the younger brother of Charles Sanders Peirce. Charles tells of the incident as follows:

I well remember when I was a boy, and my brother Herbert, now our minister at Christiania, was scarce more than a child, one day, as the whole family were at table, some spirit from a “blazer” or “chafing-dish” dropped on the muslin dress of one of the ladies (i.e. their mother) and was kindled; and how instantaneously he jumped up, and did the right thing, and how skillfully each motion was adapted to the purpose. I asked him afterward about it; and he told me that since Mrs. Longfellow’s death, it was that he had often run over in imagination all the details of what ought to be done in such an emergency. It was a striking example of a real habit produced by exercises in the imagination. (Collected Papers. 5.487 note #1 and 5.538) (footnote #1)

Fannie Longfellow had died in a dress fire in 1861, when Herbert Peirce was about twelve. Fannie was pouring candle wax to seal an envelope, and her gauze dress caught on fire. When she screamed her husband, napping in the next room, immediately got up, grabbed a rug and began to put out the

fire. But the rug was too small, and in her panic, Fannie pulled away and ran across the room. Then, after losing precious seconds, she ran back to her husband and he extinguished the fire. But by then Fannie's body had been blackened and she lived only a few more hours (Wagenknecht, 1956, p. 242; McFarland, 2004, pp. 243-4).

This story was repeated throughout Cambridge, and, I think we can assume, everyone was concerned with having the right size rug at hand. Herbert, who evidently never wrote about his action, must have been mentally practicing how to seize the right rug, encircle some woman's enflamed body and put out the fire. Of course young boys are always engaging in self-heroic fantasies, but in this case the fantasy came true. It also gives a crisp and dramatic example of Dewey's distinction between deliberation and execution.

This deliberation process is also, in large part, a matter of inner speech or internal conversation. All of the pragmatists recognized this process at the core of the self (Wiley, 2006b). Thought and planning are central to this activity. And it seems as though freedom of choice itself, to the extent that we have it, is also partly a matter of inner speech. We first exercise choice in inner speech -- we say to ourselves that we are going to do it. But only later do we externalize it in action, and at that we sometimes back out. Making a pre-choice in our inner speech is, in a way, a stage between deliberation and overt action.

Another one of Dewey's major concepts was habit. In the 1930 revision of Human Nature and Conduct, p. viii, Dewey explained that between the 1922 and 1930 versions of the book the discipline of psychology had changed from

an emphasis on instincts, which were thought to be biologically innate forces that determined people's personalities, to habit, which was a largely symbolic concept. For Dewey habit was the unit of culture.

Peirce and Mead also used the term habit, and for them it was a semiotic response that was repeated and patterned. For Peirce the meaning of a sign was the habit it produces. James used the term both for a physical response and a significative one. So all four of the pragmatists used this term in approximately the same way. And for each it was associated with the emergent, i.e. non-biological, self and with the system of culture. Dewey used habit in multiple, highly nuanced ways, and it is his tool for exploring the complexities of the self.

Dewey was always both personally and intellectually close to Mead. In 1931, after Mead's death, he said he had great respect for and agreed with Mead's theory of the self (Dewey, 1933). This was quite an admission, since Mead's self theory was extremely complex and pretty much his own invention. Dewey's use of habit showed his closeness to Mead's significant symbol. We can assume then that if Dewey were to flesh out his agentic scheme he would fill it largely with Mead's ideas. When I turn to Mead now to present his own ideas, it should be understood that I am talking about Dewey as well.

2. Mead

According to Mead, the key feature of the self is in its being an object to itself (1964, p. 243). The self is a recursive or looping entity,

which turns back on itself. This is what allows it to be aware of itself. The relation of self to itself which is self awareness entails a sort of split in the self between a reflecting and a reflected aspect. For Mead the reflecting aspect is the “I” and the reflected upon aspect is the “me.”

What I have just described is ordinary or first order reflexivity. But sometimes the self jumps to a higher level and reflects on its entirety, i.e. on both the I and the me. In this case it is aware of itself, not in a partial manner, such as a thermostat or other feedback device. These self-regulating machines have two parts, the part being reflected upon and the part doing the reflecting. And the latter part can never reflect on itself. This makes mechanical reflexivity only partial. In contrast the self can reflect on the totality of itself. This is because the reflecting device is, so to speak, another self; one that is meta to the one being reflected upon. In this case the self does not really split into two parts like the self-regulating machines. It doubles up into a first order and a second order or meta self. Thus the entire self is in the “reflected upon” position, and another version of the entire self is in the “reflecting” position.

Sometimes people say that mechanical reflexivity devices are “selves,” because they share the property of reflexivity with selves. Machines can be engineered to do this. But they are reflexive in a more limited sense than selves, and the attribution of selfhood to these devices is fallacious.

Mead also argue that this reflexivity is a transformation of the infant’s first social relationship, the one formed between baby and its caretaker. This is a complex but breathtaking insight and it will take several pages to explain it. The reflected, as opposed to the reflecting, self is a generalized

form of the caretaker, now incorporated into the self as an internalized other. Mead sometimes refers to the me as a “generalized other” (1964, p. 246).

In other words the self, being an internalized and condensed social relation, is modeled after an interpersonal relation. And this relation is usually that of infant and mother. In what appears to be a small minority of cases, the close caretaker is a male, normally the father. And sometimes there is more than one close caretaker. But the most common case is one in which the close caretaker is the biological mother. Baby begins with a strong identification with the mother, but gradually separates into a semi- and then more or less completely autonomous self. Just how close the original identification is, how long the separation process takes, what stages it goes through, and so on, are matters of discussion in the child development literature.

The relation between child and caretaker becomes internalized so that it exists inside of the infant, even in the absence of the mother. The internalized mother, then, gradually becomes more plasticized and generalized so that anyone can occupy the space that was initially occupied by the mother or close caretaker. Finally the internal dyad, though based on the child-mother bond, is transformed into two aspects of the baby’s self. This is what Mead referred to as the dialogical self and what he called the “I” and the “me.”

The internal society, baby and caretaker, becomes the form of the self. The self is a two-sided relationship which can house, not only the caretaker, but also anyone else. Baby’s first relationship to the caretaker

becomes the template for relationships with other people. First these others are family members and close intimates. But gradually this dyadic form can accommodate anyone else as the partner to the infant. This partner or other gradually becomes an aspect of the self. For Mead the self-caretaker relationship broadens into a self-other relationship and this becomes a self-self or “I-me” relationship. So as the relationship internalizes it passes from I-mother to I-other to I-me. Mead’s self is the internalization of the social relationship.

The pragmatist version of the self then, including both male and female selves, is usually modeled after the mother. In other words even though the self has sometimes been given what could be interpreted as a highly separated, masculine tilt, e.g. by Descartes; for the pragmatists it is usually the product of a mother’s love and therefore might be said to have a feminine ontogeny or tilt.

This bit of pragmatist child development theory fits the psychoanalytic view of Nancy Chodorow, although it concerns an earlier stage in the infant’s life (Chodorow, 1978). She compared the outcomes of the oedipal and electra complexes as they occur in females and males. She concluded that in the female case the child remains somewhat under-separated from the mother. This explained, according to Chodorow, why women are usually more skilled with emotions than men and also why they tend to be better “motherers,” i.e. close caretakers.

Men, she concluded, experience the opposite effect of being over-separated from their mothers and thereby from all women. This makes them usually less skilled with emotions and child-rearing.

From a pragmatist point of view, the reason why women tend to be under-separated and men over-separated from their mothers is because both genders are outgrowths of their mothers in the first place. Women's electra complexes are continuous with this feminine origin, and it is understandable that women would remain close to (or "under-separated" from) their mothers. In contrast men, who are told to identify with a gender other than that of their mother, would initially have the same tendency as women, i.e. to stay close to their mother.

But since males are not allowed to indulge this natural tendency they have to try extra hard to find their gender. In fact they have to be over separated, not only from their mothers, but from their selves. The solution to this problem would seem to be to allow men to be less "masculine" and more like women. This may in fact have been the case before male work became separated from the farm and home with the industrial revolution (Laqueur, 1990, pp 149-192). The Meadean theory of the self, then, explains the fundamental similarity between men and women and the reason why men in industrial society are often uncomfortable in their gender.

The reflexivity of the self, which is the key to thought and language for Mead, is a product of the internalized social relation. The condensed relation to the mother permits the self to relate to itself, which is what is meant by reflexivity. This reflexivity permits the self to role-take, which is Mead's term for being able to understand and communicate with another. The major functions of the self are closely interconnected for Mead. The social origins of the self, in the condensed relation to the caretaker, lead to

the thinking, linguistic, communicative self. These capacities in turn lead back to the mother. There is a loop in the infant then, from mother-as-caretaker to the internalized social relation to the linguistic-communicative capacity and then back to mother (and anyone else) as an autonomous, thinking and talking human being.

One can understand why Dewey was impressed by Mead's theory of self, for it is both original and ingenious. I have the impression that, given Mead's loss of early religious faith, he decided, rather obsessively, to replace religion with reason. In particular he wanted to explain everything traditionally attributed to the soul in naturalistic terms. He wanted to explain all the mysteries with a purely secular theory of the self. I do not think he completely succeeded, for he never could explain the phylogenetic origins of the self in the primates, which in religious terms would be the creation of the soul. But he may have come closer than anyone else. In any case he has the most developed theory of the self of all the pragmatists.

Mead's reflexivity has another quality that should be mentioned. The nature of a reflexive relation will depend on which aspect of the self is being known and looped through. Mead's reflexivity is between the I, the subject and center of the self so to speak, and the me, which is an object and is in the past. Peirce's notion of reflexivity, to anticipate this point, was between the self and the "you," which Peirce defined as "that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time" (5.421). Peirce's you is the self of the immediate future. The temporal passage of the self is from you to I to me, or in other words from future to present to past. These temporal positions can be thought of and experienced as either physical or

psychological i.e. as knife-edge or “felt.” It also seems that we experience these positions in both respects at the same time, and the combination of the two modes of experiencing the flow of time can be quite complex.

Given these two modes of reflexivity, Mead’s reflexivity is a looping between subject and object or present and past. In contrast Peirce’s reflexivity is a looping between two subjects, that of the present and that of the immediately incoming future. If we accept both Mead and Peirce, it seems that the self has (at least) two modes of reflexivity, Mead’s to a past-object and Peirce’s to a future-subject.

Another way of saying this is that inner speech has two major voices -- to the past and to the future. These two voices have different moral qualities. As Dewey said “authorship and liability look in two different ways, one to the past, and the other to the future” (1958, p. 233). In other words the past is, to a great extent, morally settled; the future is morally open.

The two voices also have different communicative and signifying qualities. The voice to the past deals in rather stable states and certainties. The voice to the future deals in unstable configurations and uncertainties. These two reflexivities seem to be able to talk to each other and they constitute a distinct layer of the dialogical self. In addition these two help explain how complex the life of imagination is. There can be many voices and they might well be sometimes speaking in harsh dissonance.

The distinction between Mead’s me and Peirce’s you also suggests a way that pragmatism can explain self deceit or what Sartre called bad faith

(Sartre, 1957b, pp. 47-70). Your past is more or less settled and done with, allowing that it is always subject to reinterpretation. The future is open and indeterminate. Your choices are primarily for the future, not the past.

But people sometimes falter when they face a tough decision, pretending that one particular option, usually the safer one, is the only one they have. For example, you keep quiet when an evil act is being committed, afraid to take the risk of speaking out. You could have tried to stop the evil, but you pretended that there was no avenue but to close your eyes. You kidded yourself to avoid the pain of facing your cowardice.

When you do this you are pretending that the open future is like the fixed past, determined and closed. You are facing your you, which is the self that is soon to come to be, and you are seeing it as a me, the self that has already been and is sedimented into your past. Sartre referred to this as taking being for itself as being in itself, i.e taking the conscious and free to be without consciousness and inert. But I think the pragmatist formulation of mistaking the you for the me is a simpler and more compelling explanation.

At this point I must make a short digression. I am aware that when using the terms “me,” “I,” and “you,” it may sound like I think there are little people or humunculi inside people’s heads. I may seem to be hypostasizing or reifying these ideas. But this usage is merely a literary device for facilitating communication. It must be decoded. These phases of the self, the you, I and me, are actually part of a rolling process. Our personal time is breezing along inside of James’s stream of consciousness. It is continuous and fluid. It does not have stops, let alone little islands that

have names. But we can still distinguish the future from the past. And we can identify the present, both the theoretical or knife-edge present and the felt or saddle block present. This latter point in time can be referred to as I or even as “the” I. The future can be called you and the past can be called me. These words are a convenience for conveying a particular idea about the flow of time. And they are also built into ordinary language. Time itself actually flows continuously, but we can divide it, analytically into past, present and future (or the self-in-time as me, I and you). So when I refer what may sound like little people inside our heads, I am actually talking about the process of temporal passage and how we, somewhat artificially, slice it up.

It is also important to remember that these self pronouns have reflexive meanings. “I” does not refer to some fixed person. It refers to whomever is saying “I.” The same is true of you and me. And “you” has the additional ambiguity of referring, a la Peirce, either to the future of whichever “I” is at center stage or to whomever we might be talking to. It can be the other me, approaching the present from the future, or it can be our interpersonal or conversational partner

Beyond this, these three pronouns, at least as I am using them, are relative to the flow of time. “I” refers to time at the precise moment when we utter the word, I. You and me are also relative to the temporal flow. So the pronouns are twice relative: to the person doing the talking and to the stream of time. I am using the terms I, me and you quite casually, for analysis calls for this usage. But when we unfold these terms and apprehend their precise meanings, we find the complex pair of relativities I just described. Nevertheless, if we spoke with all the precision and nuance

that these ideas carry, the discourse would be opaque with congestion. Therefore I say “I”, “you” and “me” with the understanding that I am referring, for ease of utterance, to something far more wordy and conceptually complicated.

Having concluded that digression, let me return to two earlier points. Bad faith or self deceit in pragmatist terms, to conclude my original comment, is the mistaking of the future for the past, the you for the me, or freedom for determinism. It is a particular form of sin or moral flaw, namely the violation of our best possibilities or dignity .

And returning to my larger point, both Mead’s and Peirce’s reflexivities fit into Dewey’s agentic self. In the kind of action that the agentic self is engaging in we are facing the future and dialoguing it to find the right path to take. And we are also dialoguing the past to find out which actions have proved to be unsuitable. When Herbert Peirce was thinking about Fannie Longfellow’s death he was dialoguing the past. When he was thinking about how he would act if he were ever faced with such a challenge, he was dialoguing the future.

3. Peirce

Turning to Peirce, his definition of the self was in terms of meaning or significance. As he said, humans are “signs” (1934, 5.314). And as such they are composed of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs, i.e. the whole range of signs (Perinbanayagam, 1991, p. 11). Peirce’s theory of signs was derived from his argument against Descartes and intuition. An intuition, in the specialized sense in which Peirce used the term, was an

idea or proposition that is self validating. It needs no previous propositions from which it is derived. And it needs no future evidence or experimentation. It is clearly true as it stands. Peirce's position was that there were no intuitions. Ideas, he held, were signs, and as such they had to be interpreted. They were never clear and distinct in themselves. They had to unfold gradually, and they had to do so by way of an interpretive process engaged in by individuals and communities.

Peirce's favorite example of an invalid intuition was Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes thought this statement was self evident, that to think this proposition was to be convinced of it. But Peirce argued that there is no direct *cogito*. We encounter the self indirectly and never intuitively.

Peirce's notion of the nature of the self has important consequences. Since human cultures as well as selves are based on signs and symbols, these cultures reflect the features of signs. In particular, cultures are highly variable. They differ a great deal across time and space. Cultures reflect the plasticity of signs, and these signs in turn reflect the plasticity of human selves.

This leads to the idea that all selves, being plastic and of indefinite possibilities, are therefore fundamentally the same. Peirce's self seems to be an empty template for a sign, i.e. for any sign and for any number of signs. All empty templates are alike. Peirce's self-sign resembles Locke's "tabula rasa," in being undetermined and open to any meaning. But Locke's mind has a tabular rasa whereas Peirce's self is a tabula rasa (or generic sign).

Peirce's semiotic self also resembles Sartre's idea that the self is, in some respects, a "nothingness," remembering that Sartre's nothingness has the technical meaning of an absence or privation (Sartre, 1957a). Accordingly Sartre's nothingness, like Peirce's semiotic self, can become an indefinite variety of "somethingnesses." In other words Peirce's self has unlimited potential; as a sign it can become a sign of anything. Peirce formed this notion of the self for logical reasons. His denial of intuitions led him, via the notion of semiotic, to an indefinitely variable self.

Peirce was not thinking of the political implications of this self, and his own political views seem to have been quite conservative, for the most part. His private, non-philosopher self was probably quite racist, patriarchal etc., making him a man of his times. But sometimes ideas have "their own ideas," i.e. they have implications that were unforeseen by their originators. This is a property that Robert Merton called "unanticipated consequences" and Max Weber called "elective affinity." In this case the ontological or structural similarities of all semiotic selves strongly suggests that biologically determinist and racist theories of the self are erroneous and that selves are formed by purely symbolic processes.

When Peirce was writing, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the most widespread view of the self was that it was largely determined by instincts and genes. This belief was not only held concerning people of color, such as Asians and blacks, but of all the other ethnic groups as well. In particular Central and Eastern Europeans were thought to be psychologically and morally inferior to Western Europeans and to be so

because their were physiologically determined to be so.

The Peircean idea of the self always had the potential of suggesting that all selves were the same, i.e. that they were all psychologically and morally similar kinds of entities. In other words the Peircean self could easily transform into the egalitarian self of the American Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg address

The early Twentieth century introduced a controversy between the racist “Americanization” movement and the more liberal ideas of the pragmatists, the social sciences and in particular anthropology and sociology (Higham, 1988). This controversy extended over several years, and in the process the egalitarian theory of the self was gradually worked out and honed. In other words, the biologism and racism of the Americanization movement pushed pragmatism’s theory of the self even more in the opposite, i.e. the cultural, direction. All four of the major pragmatists as well as the many secondary pragmatists contributed to this controversy.

Dewey decribes, in restrained language, the victory of the liberal side, as follows:

When this volume was first produced, there was a tendency, especially among psychologists, to insist upon native human nature untouched by social influences and to explain social phenomena by reference to traits of original nature called “instincts.” Since that date (1922), the pendulum has undoubtedly swung in the opposite direction. The importance

of culture as a formative medium is more generally recognized (Dewey, 1929, p. viii).

The moral and legal equality of all humans was slowly recognized, if not always acted upon, in the 1920s and later. In practice this idea implied the equality of all sub-cultural groups, including race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on, although it took decades for these democratic implications to work themselves out.

Another way of seeing the egalitarianism of Peirce's definition of humans was in its closeness to the anthropological concept of culture. This concept of culture has been the great equalizer in the social sciences. In particular cultural relativity -- the principle that cultures have to be understood in terms that are relative to that culture -- suggests that all cultures, sub-cultures and individuals are fundamentally equal. And that all individuals therefore have the same rights. The unit of culture is signs and symbols, and Peirce's notion of signs can, with minor transformation, be translated into the notion of culture (discussed in great detail in Wiley, 2006a).

Peirce was also responsible for the revival of the dialogical self, an idea found in Plato and in the Middle Ages but ignored since the time of Descartes (Wiley, 2006a, 2006b). This idea too has egalitarian implications, for if humans are self steered by a dialogical process, this is clearly a non-biological, cultural force. Peirce's notion of the semiotic self and the dialogical process both had radically egalitarian implications, perhaps still to this day in the process of being worked out. Peirce then is a striking example of unintended consequences, for his purely analytical

ideas gradually flowed through an interpretive, elective affinity process and became foundational for America political liberalism.

4. James

Like the other pragmatists, James had a reflexive view of the self. In fact, drawing on the German idealists, he originated the I-me distinction. As he put it

We may sum up by saying that personality implies the incessant presence of two elements, an objective person, known by a passing subjective Thought and recognized as continuing in time. Hereafter let us use the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging thought (James, 1950, p. 371)

So the idea I am attributing to Mead was present in simpler form in James. I do not think James would have disagreed with the way Mead developed his insight into the internal conversation, but James himself did not stay with the I-me distinction and make it more precise.

James had another defining feature of the self however and this was what he referred to as “self feeling.” Two quotes give an initial idea of what he had in mind.

In its widest possible sense, however, a man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes

and his house his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and words, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions (1950, p. 291

And in another place

The words me, then, and self, as far as they arouse feeling and connote emotional worth, are objective designations, meaning all the things which have the power to produce in the stream of consciousness excitement of a certain peculiar sort (1950, p 319).

This way of coming at the self is quite different from the I-me distinction, for it is not cognitive but emotional. The I-me approach divides the self into parts that differ in self-communicative function. The self-feeling approach divides the self into parts that differ in how we feel about ourselves. It might have been better if James had stayed with the I-me distinction and simply added the self-feeling perspective, for they are both valid and powerful views of the self and both seem true to experience. But he did not.

James begins his analysis of self feeling with a property metaphor, as though the things to which we give self feeling or “ownership” become extensions of the self. But self feeling is somewhat undefined in James and it has perhaps several slightly differing meanings. I would like to take hold of the expression “excitement of a certain peculiar sort” and give this an interpretation.

The word “excitement” suggests that James has something

extraordinary and unusual in mind. But since James does not give any precise definition to self feeling, the concept seems quite open to the reader's interpretation. Perhaps it is not stretching things too far to suggest that James is here getting at the particular charisma that is characteristic of the human self, particularly in modern times. This seems to be what underlies the excitement of the self.

The self is sacred, according to Durkheim, and this mana or sacredness can extend to the things that one loves or is closest too. Mana is contagious; it jumps from person to person and from center to periphery. Durkheim's sacred is similar to Weber's charisma, particularly as it is exercised by a charismatic leader. The charismatic person too has a somewhat contagious charisma, as people who are close to the leader feel energized by contact with the charisma.

In contemporary times the self is the most sacred of entities. For many people and certainly for most legal systems, it is more sacred than the religious entities. The sacred self, then, resembles the charismatic leader in having a glow of value or holiness. James himself did not give much theoretical development to the notion of self feeling, but I am engaging in what I think is a not unreasonable interpretation.

Cooley also used self feeling, in a slightly different way than James. He looked at feelings the self has about itself, and he drew the important insight of the looking glass self, later richly developed in Erving Goffman's books (Cooley 1922, pp. 183-4; Scheff, 2005). Nevertheless I want to take James's concept in a different direction than Cooley did.

More generally I decided to make this paper tilt in a cognitive, i.e. not an emotional, direction. Let me explain. The pragmatists all had comments on emotions, but putting these comments together and integrating them with the cognitive side is the task for another paper. And it is pretty clear that most emotions will fit into Dewey's agency scheme largely as sources of energy, pro and con, for action.

Also I think the cognitive aspect of the self is what makes humans most obviously distinct from the other animals. Human emotionality is also probably distinct, but the distinctness seems less striking.

An additional reason for leaning cognitive is that this issue is what the American "politics of the self" was fought over. My view is that in the early Twentieth century the United States was drifting in a non-democratic, authoritarian political direction, the Americanization movement being central to this drift. The influence of the pragmatists, largely concerning the cognitive and cultural nature of the self, helped swerve this country back toward the democratic center.

Another way of saying this is that the pragmatists finished off the still inconclusive Civil War, at least in its underlying ideological fight. This war was in large part over the morality of slavery. It took a while, but when the pragmatist theory of the self gradually developed its fully egalitarian implications, the United States could finally see what the fight was about. They could see that it was a violation of human nature to have slaves, and they could also see in what deeper sense African Americans were equal to and the same as all other people. It took a clarified theory of the self to explain this issue.

Returning to James's notion of self feeling, this idea appears to be ripe for development. One obvious way to do this is to connect it to the sacred self of Durkheim and Weber, as I have hinted. I will not pursue this connection extensively at this time, but it suggests how the value of the self fits into the pragmatists' theory.

I would say then, that although James had a reflexivity theory of the self, he also had a quasi-religious one, in which the self is permeated with a sacred feeling or emotion. This emotion is similar to Durkheim's religious awe. This quality of the self was not explicated by Peirce, Dewey or Mead, but it is compatible with their views of the self.

Another quality of James's self feeling concept is that it gives a clearer role for the body than is the case with the other pragmatists. In particular Mead and Peirce concentrated on explaining what is unique about humans in the animal kingdom. For Peirce the differentia is the sign and for Mead it is the closely related idea of reflexivity (and its product, the significant symbol). In other words both Peirce and Mead defined humans without mentioning their bodies. This is understandable since they are trying to capture the unique quality of humans. Implicitly they are both saying that humans are bodies that have the property of signification and symbolism. But this remains implicit and it does give some indetermination to the role or the body in pragmatist self theory.

James does not have this problem. Since he actually defines the self in terms of self feeling, the body, which is high on his list of self feeling items, is central to his characterization of the self. And given that reflexivity and

self feeling are quite compatible, the self can be defined as having both reflexivity and self feeling. The body is the carrier of the property of reflexivity and signification, but it is at the actual center of self feeling. So James adds a clarification to the role of the body. I would add that the body seems to have more self feeling for women than for men -- it is closer to the "self" for women. But I am basing this on ordinary experience and on my conversations with family and friends, not on formal evidence of any kind.

The pragmatists also attributed other features to the self, but these four -- agency, sociality, symbolicity and self feeling -- go a long way to constructing a theory of the self. The self has ends and it can exercise meaningful self awareness in pursuit of these ends. This self awareness also creates value, for the self evokes an awe and reverence in other people, i.e. in the community.

This profile of the self can be seen in the example of Herbert Peirce saving his mother's life. I have already pointed out how agency, in both its deliberative and active stages, is strikingly visible in this example. Herbert was rehearsing with the signs and symbols of Fannie Longfellow's death and also of the undetermined person whose life he was preparing to save. His thoughts would also be characterized by Mead's reflexivity and sociality, for this is arguably the nature of all thought. And Herbert's self feeling would be intensely engaged as he anticipated the dress fire and the life saving of someone he loved. These concepts work together rather well to describe the actual practices of selves, and it seems clear that they constitute a coherent and powerful theory.

I am not suggesting that this is a "finished" theory of the self. But no

school of philosophers -- Greeks, Medievals, British Empiricists, German idealists, contemporary post-structuralists or post-modernists -- has a finished theory of the self. Their theories would probably all have as many weaknesses of the one I am working with. But as Peirce said, the point is for the community of thinkers to keep on thinking. My motive in writing this paper is to induce others to write better ones on the same topic.

5. General Properties of the Pragmatist Self

This theory can also be described in a brief list of its characteristics. Up to now I have been talking about four discrete theorists. Now I am talking about the four of them taken collectively, i.e. as a shared theory. This will be a loose list, and I mean it to be an umbrella over the theory.

Irreducible. The self cannot be reduced to some other kind of thing, either upwards or downwards. Upwardly the self could be reduced or dissolved into language or culture, which would render it a form of nothingness. Downwardly the self could be absorbed into physical, chemical, or biological processes, ceasing to be a supra-biological entity and therefore becoming another form of nothingness. But the pragmatist self is a sui generis entity, incapable of reduction in either direction. This irreducibility has implications for the dignity of the self. If there is no self, i.e. if it is subject to reduction, then the whole human drama is a sham. Rights, consciousness, self worth, conscience, and love, to mention some features of the self, would all be a delusion. All the human values, in my opinion, assume an irreducible self, and the pragmatist's self is of that nature.

Dialogical. The core process of the self is dialogical. The self functions by exercising a dialogue with itself as well as with others. This is how we think, how we plan and how we steer ourselves through the world. When people are emotionally disturbed inner speech becomes damaged and loses some of its function. Internal dialogue is at the core of the healthy self.

There are also unconscious processes, both emotional and cognitive, and these are distinct from the conscious dialogue. But the conscious process is probably the most important part of the self. And in any case the unconscious processes may themselves be dialogical.

Decentered. The self of the pragmatists lacks a strong center, for it is divided into discrete and semi-autonomous parts. Mead's I and me are certainly a decentered self. If you add Peirce's you there is more decentering. And James's network of possessions that share in self feeling also add to the decentering. Descartes "I" was the powerful center of the self. Nothing else in his self had this centrality or rootedness. The "I" of the pragmatists is more like an equal partner with several other important players. This I is at a kind of administrative center but not necessarily at the center of meaning or feeling.

Relational. If the self is not a Cartesian substance and is not reduced to physicalist or post-modern nothingness, the only serious category left is that of relation. Relations are pairs that are connected in some way. In the case of the self they are pairs connected by reflexivity, i.e. by a looping back onto itself. All aspects of the self are aspects of the reflexive relation.

This relativity is basic to the self's decenteredness. It also underlies the

internal dialogue, for one part of the relation addresses the other part. I see the self as a triad, embracing the I, Mead's me and Peirce's you. This triad is the combination of two relationships: Mead's I-me and Peirce's I-you. The self then is composed of many relationships but the basic kind of entity is the relation.

Egalitarian. There are several important egalitarian strains within the pragmatist theory of self. Peirce's self is the most strongly egalitarian of the four. His self-as-a-sign is a kind of rubber band or silly putty which can be stretched in an indefinite number of ways. Equality is rooted in this flexibility.

Dewey's self was a distinctly ordinary man, contradictory to all versions of inequality. Mead's self is anti-patriarchal, initially a female and then branching out into the two genders. His self also has Peirce's plasticity. And the charisma of James's self if one of equal and inviolable value. The sacred self, in contemporary times, is the source of Weber's substantive rationality. This was his category of the good-in-itself. All selves are sacred in the same way, and this make them all of equal value.

Voluntarist. The pragmatist self is goal seeking and self determined. The agency framework implies voluntarism, and the term "pragmatism" suggests the self-steering of practice. Similarly inner speech seems to be the place where choices are initially made and tried out.

The social institutions in all societies, including the regulatory or legal system and the family, assume that people make choices and are responsible for these choices. It is difficult to see how these institutions would have

evolved and remained in place if humans were completely determined. Therefore the pragmatist position on self determination seems to fit the practical realities of life.

Cultural. Pragmatism's self is culturally-driven, although bodies obviously have a huge influence on the self. Nevertheless the distinctive features of the self are cultural or symbolic. The particular way culture animates and steers the self explains how human lives develop. Symbols steer them, not genes or other biological traits.

Culture is composed of signs and symbols. So semiotics -- which is the study of signs -- underlies culture. The pragmatists had a semiotic view of the self, meaning the self is primarily composed of signs and symbols. To say that the self is semiotic and to say that it is cultural is to say the same thing. These concepts also lead to the egalitarian self, for all selves are made of the same plastic, highly malleable "stuff."

Social Sciences. The pragmatist theory of the self is closely related to the social sciences, especially as they developed in the United States. I have already mentioned that the pragmatist notion of the self runs parallel to the anthropological concept of culture. The social sciences have also used some form of Mead's social self for a long time. In addition the pragmatist theme of the dialogical self has a counterpart in social psychology. And the pragmatist theory of meaning, given a semiotic or cultural interpretation, underlies all of the social sciences.

Conclusion

This paper has implications for several broader issues. I will briefly touch on some lines of thought that are suggested by this essay.

Form vs. Content. A formal property of the self can be defined as a feature that is claimed to be part of all selves at all times and places. For example Peirce's idea that selves are symbolic, or Mead's idea that they are reflexive (i.e. self aware). My discussion has been primarily at the formal level. A substantive feature of the self would be a matter of content as opposed to form. A particular identity, for example, or a self concept of some kind would be at the level of content. The boundary between form and content is not always clear, and sometimes only time can tell which is which. For example, saying the self "maximizes" seems formal, but it may come and go with modern capitalism.

Even if traits were around for centuries, such as male hegemony, Christianity or what Weber called modern capitalism, they would still be matters of content -- having the quality of (long-term) transiency. Content can come and go, but the formal qualities remain.

When Foucault (1973) defined humans in terms of epistemes he was giving them a time bound, content-based definition. And if an episteme fades over time, one might say, along with Foucault, that man is now erased, eliminated or dead. But the form would persist and simply adopt a new content, becoming in fact the (re)birth of man.

Family Resemblance. The unity of the pragmatists seems to be one, not of essence but of Wittgensteinian family resemblance. Wittgenstein used this term in two senses: structural and stylistic (suggested to me by Perinbanayagam, 2006. pp. 63-67). Wittgenstein's list of family resemblances includes "build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc." (Wittgenstein, 1958: par 66 and 67). The first four items are structural features of the body. But the last one, temperament, is more a matter of emotional style. Certain ways of smiling, laughing, frowning, etc. sometimes run in families. These are the emotional expression or style of the bodily structure.

If we follow the now common practice of applying Wittgenstein's family resemblance analogically to other kinds of groupings, such as clusters of scholars, we might look for the two kinds of similarities: structural and stylistic. Among thinkers, structural similarities would be ideas that they, more or less, hold in common. Similarities of style would seem to be matters of presentation and logic, including informal logic and logic-in-use.

The pragmatist theory of the self, for example, entails these structural features: agency, symbolicity, goal directedness, internal plurality, dialogicality and interpenetration with society. The pragmatists placed different nuances and emphases on these ideas but they had enough in common to say they had a family resemblance in the structural sense.

The pragmatists also shared such stylistic features as an emphasis on consequents rather than antecedents, a concern for the tangibility or observability of concepts, a suspicion of dualisms, an acceptance of the first

person perspective and a relational view of the self.

The unity, then, of the pragmatist theory of the self is not one of uniformity or essence but one of family resemblance, in both the structural and stylistic senses of the word.

Humanism. What I have said so far implies a distinct humanism for this philosophy, but the point has nevertheless been implicit. At the risk of stating the obvious I would like to make it explicit.

Pragmatism is one of the few remaining humanist philosophies. This philosophy insists that humans actually exist. And cannot be explained away by dissolving them into some other reality, such as language or computers. The pragmatist position is that humans are pretty much as we experience them. We think we see and hear, and we actually do see and hear. We seem to choose, and we do choose. We seem to have some kind of agency or center of action, and we do have this center. We seem to think our way through life, and we do think our way through life.

In addition pragmatism sees humans as having intrinsic value and inviolability. We have rights, and these rights come from the nature of our selves, not from governments. And the rights are equal, not only in the United States but throughout the world, at all times and places. Men and women also have the same rights, all racial, ethnic and sub-cultural groups have the same rights, and the Declaration of Independence with its radical egalitarianism pretty much describes pragmatism's ethics

Finally pragmatism is humanistic in being comfortably suitable for democracy. This philosophy and American democracy have had a back-and-forth, causal dialogue for many decades. Democracy, with its system of voting, civil liberties and equal rights assumes a particular kind of human nature or “self.” And this “self” seems quite close to the one I have described in this paper.

Footnotes

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1. In this referencing system the first digit refers to the volume of Peirce’s Collected Papers, and the subsequent digits refer to the paragraph.

2. Kierkegaard is often claimed to have said “we live life forward and understand it backwards.” Actually he said, “It is quite true what Philosophy says: that Life must be understood backwards. But that makes one forget the other saying: that it must be lived -- forwards.” (Kierkegaard, 1971, pt. 5, sct. 4, no. 136). Still, true as this may be, we “think” our way through life both forwards (Peirce) and backwards (Mead). We use the power of inner speech in both directions. In

particular we talk our way through actions and into the future.

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