

## AMERICAN PRAGMATISTS AND PRAGMATISM

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The three decades before the American Civil War were an age of idealism, romanticism, and philosophical transcendentalism. But the Civil War wrought a great change in the American scene. Industrialism mushroomed almost overnight; it had transformed practices of agriculture, and had encouraged a heedless exploitation of our natural resources. America became industrial-minded, business-minded. What the American people demanded from their industrialists and financiers was practical *results*. It was not long before a philosophical method came to reflect the qualities of the American character. Practical, democratic, opportunistic, individualistic, spontaneous and hopeful, the philosophical method of pragmatism was accurately adapted to the American temperament.

The term "pragmatism" is derived from the Greek word *πράγμα* (*pragma*), meaning action, from which our words "practice" and "practical" come. It was first introduced into philosophy by Charles Sanders Peirce in 1878. Peirce made contributions to the fields of mathematical logic and scientific methodology, as well as other areas of scientific study. But he is best known as the creator of pragmatism as a distinct philosophical method. In January, 1878, he wrote an article for *Popular Science Monthly* entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." In this article he wrote: "In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result, by necessity, from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception." In other words, the meaning of an idea is the envisaged practical consequences of the idea. What Peirce was concerned with here was a technique for ascertaining the *meaning* of conceptions. What our ideas *mean* is the sum total of their anticipated effects.

For two decades Peirce's teachings lay almost unnoticed by others.

William James, the famous psychologist, whose father and brother were both "Swedenborgians" (in a loose sense), was the successor to Peirce's ideas. Though James rejected what he

termed the mysticism of the Writings, he never entirely escaped their influence. For example, he believed that consciousness consisted both of intellect and will. The intellect was that thing through which we perceive ideas, and the will was that which determines what we shall think.

A New Church man knows that he should think from a *good* will, from a love of *truth*. Then, what is good, and what is truth?

We are told in the Writings that anything that leads away from good cannot be true (AC 6822). But William James says that a thing is true *if it works*. “. . . truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.*” Since, according to James, that which works is true, therefore that which works is good. But he further qualifies truth in this fashion: “. . . no concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon.” There is “nothing which someone has not thought absolutely true, while his neighbor deemed it absolutely false.” We simply do not possess an “infallible signal” for knowing what is truth and what is not. Thus truth is relative. There is no such thing as absolute truth. To illustrate: Where does a thought come from? From any place. The important point is, where does a thought lead us? If the “total drift of thinking” continues to confirm it (i.e., our original thought), then, and to that extent, it is true.

To James, then, there exists no absolute and objective standard of truth to which we can appeal. Temperament “loads the evidence” one way or another for every thinker, “making for a more sentimental or a more hard-hearted view of the universe.” Plato, Locke, Hegel, Spencer—all were “temperamental thinkers.” Differences in temperament, James said, are discernible in literature, art, government and manners, as well as in philosophy. “In manners we find formalists and free-and-easy persons. In government, authoritarians and anarchists. In literature, purists or academics, and realists. In art, classics and romantics.” In philosophy James pointed to the contrast between rationalists and empiricists, the rationalist being a “devotee to abstract and eternal principles,” and the empiricist the “lover of facts in all their crude variety.” But since no one can really live without considering both facts and principles, the difference is one of emphasis rather than

absolute cleavage. But when we enter the field of philosophy proper, the incompatibility between empiricism and rationalism leads to inconsistencies. To resolve this problem, James said that the philosophy we want must transcend both empiricism and rationalism and provide a new synthesis. James believed he found it in pragmatism; for pragmatism "can remain religious" like rationalism, and can yet "preserve the richest intimacy with facts," as does empiricism.

To James and to the man of the day there was indeed an inconsistency between rationalism and empiricism. To the followers of both schools of thought their own point of view was the truth, *rather than their understanding of what they thought to be the truth; and it was this same man-made understanding of what was thought to be the truth that James carried over into pragmatism.* Rather than recognizing that the inconsistencies were finite misunderstandings of absolute truth (if and when, indeed, their statements happened to be true), which originates from God and His Divine wisdom, the pragmatist created his god in a finite image, a god which was the source of variable, changing and relative truth; and it was the mission of the pragmatist to set these truths aright, to recognize that they were relative, and to apply them to the test of individual experience.

William James's book entitled *Pragmatism* (1909) was subtitled "A New Way for Some Old Ways of Thinking." In this book James said: "There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means."

Pragmatism as a formal method of philosophy, however, was first systematized by James. Let us understand clearly, also, that pragmatism was not, and is not, a *Weltanschauung* (a world view, or, an explanation of history in general or of the purpose of the world as a whole), but rather is a method of trying to measure truth by means of practical results.

To illustrate the pragmatic *method*, let us consider an example rather far afield from the realm of philosophy. Does anyone in the United States really own any land? Is the title to land ever actually vested in the individual, or is he merely an occupant, the real owner being the state? On one hand, the individual could do what he liked with his land, could deed it to whom he pleased and dis-

pose of it in any way that suited him. But on the other hand, there was the state's power of eminent domain, the right of the state to condemn the land and take it from him, for a suitable consideration, at any time. This being the case, in whom is the ownership *really* vested? To which of these does the land *really* belong? In answer to this the pragmatist says the problem is of our own making. Instead, he says, our first question should be, "What do we *mean* by ownership?" The answer, he says, is simply the right to do this, or that, or the other with the object owned. Enumerate all the things that can be done with land; the right to do just these things *is* ownership. Once you have enumerated these rights you have exhausted the meaning of the term. Beyond this, "ownership" is a mere term without content. Thus, the individual owns the land in the sense of being able to dig in it, build on it, sell it, or give it away, etc.; and the state owns it in the sense of being able to take it from the individual if it desires. And so your question answers itself. In short, the question is merely a mystery of our own making. It seems a mystery only because it is meaningless.

The pragmatic method, then, tries to interpret each notion by its practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true. If no difference whatever can be traced, then all dispute is idle. Whenever dispute is serious we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.

Pragmatism was a philosophy of expediency. It put ideas to work and judged them by their results. It accepted any idea with which it could work as "true instrumentally," and it was sometimes called *instrumentalism* (i.e., truth is an instrument of our progress). It rejected theories and abstractions and established the single standard of workability. It was as practical as the patent office. Its expediency was individual; it came, increasingly, to be social, to require that men work together to establish the truth of their hopes. In practice Americans had always been instrumentalists. They had assumed the worth of democracy, of equality, of freedom, assessed the practical consequences of these assumptions, and committed themselves to their realization. When they had pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to the triumph of the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence they had acted pragmatically.

More than any other philosopher of modern times, James's successor, the famous John Dewey, put philosophy to the service of society. The metamorphosis of pragmatism in the mind of Dewey was illustrated by the difference between James and Dewey themselves. Both were liberals, but James's liberalism looked backwards to the nineteenth, and Dewey's forward to the twentieth century. While James enlisted in few causes, those in which he did enlist were by preference lost causes; he was attracted to them, one felt, as humane old women are attracted to stray cats, not because they were meritorious, but because they were unfortunate. He preferred gallantry to victory. Dewey's zeal for social amelioration had none of this quixotic character. He was too serious minded to enjoy a battle for its own sake; the issues of the crusades he fought were too pressing and urgent, the stakes too high. He would fight readily enough on the side of minorities, but not just because they were minorities; it is difficult to imagine him joining James in opposition to the licensing of physicians on the ground that the requirement would exclude Christian Science practitioners, mental therapists, and faith healers.

John Dewey was America's prophet of progress. As science put its trust in experimentation, so John Dewey put his trust in experimental procedures. Schools, he said, should teach through practice, through trial and error. This was his pragmatic formula put into practice, put to the service of society. He accepted Darwinian evolution with undisguised enthusiasm. To Dewey things were to be explained not by "supernatural causation," but by their place and function in the environment; ". . . to idealize and rationalize the universe at large is a confession of inability to master the course of things that specifically concern us." "Divinity is within us, not in these neutral cosmic powers." These are expressions which would put no faith in anything beyond self. Dewey rejected metaphysics as the echo and disguise of theology. The trouble with philosophy, he felt, has been that its problems were confused with those of religion. He pointed to Plato's philosophy standing on a political basis; "but soon it got lost in the dreams of another world." Here Dewey shrank back in horror from the possibility that philosophy should ever again have anything to do with religion. Instead, he saw his mission as one of leading philosophy into fields of science, politics, education and aesthetics, all directed toward advancing the happiness of mankind. Certainly religion was not the vehicle of

this happiness to Dewey, because religion was incompatible and inconsistent with philosophy. Truth, Dewey's truth, was to be the *instrument* of this new crusade. Through his pragmatism, or, as he called it, instrumentalism, he was not concerned so much with how we can come to know the world, but how we can learn to control it and remake it, and this for our own goals. Truth, then, was the *instrument* of progress, and progress was to be attained through a network of associations or groups of people which set out to eliminate the social and moral defects of the world. So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of many American people. It would be slight exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken. Pioneer in educational reform, organizer of political parties, counselor to statesmen, champion of labor, of woman's rights, of peace, of civil liberties, interpreter of America abroad and of Russia, Japan, China, and Germany to the American people, he was the spearhead of a dozen movements, the leader of a score of crusades, the advocate of a hundred reforms. Indeed, Dewey's own career seemed to be an attempt to show how effective his philosophy could be in the reconstruction of society.

### *Conclusion*

Both James and Dewey stressed democracy and freedom of the individual, but this choice was made at the cost of sacrificing true freedom—the concept of a world ruled by God. Pragmatism is the denial of Divine authority, the denial of absolute truth. Refusing to recognize the authority of the Word or of Divine revelation, the pragmatist turns to find that truth is ephemeral and evasive. What may be true of something may be proved to be false the next moment. What the pragmatist refuses to acknowledge is that it is his own finite concept of absolute truth that can be proven false. The pragmatist's answer to his own dilemma is that truth is relative. Recognizing no Divine authority provable by scientific method, the pragmatist turns to his own resources and constructs his own idea of truth. He puts thought into action by saying, "Where does a thought lead us?" "What are the consequences of this or that thought?" He answers that if the "total drift of thinking," i.e., the logical process of thought patterns, continues to con-

firm our thought, then, and to that extent, it is true. According to the pragmatist, then, that which we deem to be true *is* true, because practical consequences tell us it is true.

The pragmatic attitude was an attitude that looked "away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed necessities; and looked towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts." It is this basic premise which indicates the whole weakness of pragmatism. In their effort to be practical, the pragmatists looked to results and consequences, and found that truth was relative. They looked in one direction only, and became blind in one eye. The real necessity of both *cause* and *effect* is spoken of in many places in the Writings. "Each and everything that exist are as cause and effect; no effect can exist without an efficient cause; the efficient cause is the internal of the effect, and the effect is the external of it" (AC 9473 :2). Pragmatism was the ignorance of the relationship between internals and externals, of blindness as to causes, the failure to recognize anything above the lowest degree of the rational mind, the refusal to see anything beyond self, anything beyond chaotic creation, in which truth could only be relative.

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## PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

*Science vs. Religion:* A reference is made elsewhere in this issue to the relation of religion to science. In the review of Schroedinger's book he is quoted as follows: "The comparative truce [i.e., between religion and science] we witness today, at least among cultured people, was not reached by setting in harmony with one another the two kinds of outlook . . . but rather by a resolve to ignore each other . . . little short of contempt."

In keeping with the name of the so-called "conflict," this section is entitled "Science vs. Religion." But this very label is itself confusing. The confusion arises in the equivocal word "science" on the one hand, and in the careless interchange in the use of "religion" and "theology."

However strictly one may define religion, it seems that its force in man's mind is measured by faith and worship. Theology, on the other hand, has to do more with the formal study of the objects of faith and worship. The single word "science" is used in con-