

American Philosophy and Pragmatism

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Pragmatism is an antisystematic, anti-empirical, anti-rationalist philosophy that grew up in America in the nineteenth century. The word pragmatism fits the American pragmatists Charles Peirce, John Dewey, and William James to a tee. The practical consequences and meaning of ideas in the real world were more important to them than the theoretical coherence of some of the systematic philosophies of the past.

The Meaning of Pragmatism

Although Charles Peirce was “the Father of Pragmatism,” William James gave the term its clearest expression. “Pragmatism asks its usual question,” said James. “Grant an idea or belief to be true,’ it says, ‘what concrete difference will its being true make in one’s actual life? ... What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What in short is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?’”

In short, pragmatism asks: What difference will this truth (or belief or concept, etc.) make in your life? If you believe in God, freedom of the will, and moral responsibility, say, will this impact your life for the better? William James did more to popularize pragmatism than the two other American pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey. Worth quoting is James’s most famous dictum describing pragmatism: “There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere.” Translation: Things are not true or right because of some theoretical meaning. They must have an application and impact in the real world.

James insisted that all knowledge is pragmatic. It is difficult if not impossible to settle some philosophical questions — like whether there is a God or an afterlife. Neither reason nor empirical evidence seems to settle these matters. Where does that leave you? James thought that the best theory to believe is the one that brings about the best consequences in your life. Ask yourself: “If I believe in God, will it contribute to a successful or meaningful life for me?” If the answer is yes, then it makes sense — that is, it is pragmatic — for you to believe in God.

Charles Sanders Peirce

Charles Peirce (1839–1914) is arguably the least famous of the three American pragmatists, but he was the first to use the term. Peirce reasoned that thoughts must have the job of producing beliefs. “Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions,” he wrote. Underlying every action is a series of beliefs. In contrast, a belief that does not have consequences for action is empty and dead. For instance, you might believe that it is better to buy a new Rambler than a new Gremlin. For fun, you might even debate me on my choice of cars. But the belief that either is better has no practical application when you consider that neither Ramblers nor Gremlins are made anymore.

Peirce’s Father, Benjamin Peirce, was a professor of astronomy and mathematics at Harvard University. Charles went on to study chemistry at Harvard in 1855, graduating with a bachelor’s degree. He then worked for the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey and earned a master’s degree and Sc.B. in chemistry. Despite his education, he could only obtain nontenured teaching posts. He lectured on the philosophy of science while continuing to work for the Coastal Survey. This pattern of full-time work with part-time lecturing in philosophy became the pattern of his life.

A Theory of Meaning

Peirce coined the word pragmatism from the Greek word *pragmata* meaning “work,” “act,” or “deed.” He did this to make a point: to show that words derive their meanings from actions of some sort. Ideas

are clear if they can be translated into some kind of operation. For example, the adjectives hard and heavy have meaning only because you are able to conceive of effects associated with the words. Thus the word hard tends to mean that which cannot be scratched by other substances, as with diamonds. Heavy could mean whatever falls if you let go of it. There would be no difference between hard and heavy things if they did not test differently. From such simple examples Peirce generalized about the nature of meaning and knowledge in general. His basic point was that our idea of anything was our idea of its sensible effects.

The Role of Belief

Belief is important in pragmatism, since belief occupies a middle position between thought and action. Beliefs shape your actions. But beliefs are "unfixed" or undercut by doubts, Peirce said. It is when the "irritation of doubt" arises that you must try to justify your beliefs. Faced with doubt, you can try to "fix" your beliefs so that you have a guide for action.

You can fix your beliefs by several methods — most of them incorrect — according to Peirce. First, there is the method of tenacity, whereby people cling tightly to their beliefs, refusing to even entertain doubts about them or to consider arguments or evidence for another point of view. In this method you pile up all the evidence you can for a belief and shun all evidence to the contrary. You turn "with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb" your belief. This is the mindset of someone who says, "I know what I believe; don't confuse me with the facts."

A second way of fixing beliefs is the method of authority. Here a community of believers follows the beliefs of an authority or an entire institution. A culture based on the principle of authority cannot tolerate diverse opinions or even have contact with other belief systems. You often find the principle of authority at work in people dedicated to a political party or extreme forms of religious thinking. Peirce said that it might be wise to remember the counsel of Montaigne (1532–1592). Montaigne thought that skepticism was an antidote to the intolerance born of excessive religious zeal. Doubt is a good thing, Montaigne thought, it stops fanaticism.

A third method is the a priori method. Here one embraces beliefs because they are "agreeable to reason." However, what is agreeable to reason is subjective. Peirce thought that no fixed opinion existed in meta-physics. Plato's idealism was sensible to Platonists; Descartes's dualism was agreeable to his sense of reason; Kant's pietism made a sense of duty sound reasonable, even though it was founded on religion as much as reason. Here one's belief system is a kind of creature comfort, a cozy pet theory or hobbyhorse; a well-entrenched intellectual prejudice.

Peirce disagreed with all of these methods because they failed to fix or settle belief. What they lacked was some connection with experience and behavior. He then offered a fourth method, the method of science. This method Peirce praised because of its realistic basis in experience. As a means of resolving conflicts between alternative beliefs, Peirce recommended the scientific method, which he felt was a means to combat personal prejudice.

In his works Peirce praises the method of science for three reasons: (1) The method of science requires that you state the truth you believe and how you arrived at it. In this way, your procedures will be known to anyone who wishes to retrace the same steps to test whether the same results occur. Peirce continually emphasizes the public or community character of the method of science. (2) The method of science is self-examining and self-critical. It subjects your cherished conclusions to severe tests. Peirce says this ought also to be your attitude toward all of your beliefs, scientific and otherwise. (3) Peirce thought that science requires cooperation among all members of the scientific community. Such cooperation prevents any individual or group from shaping truth to fit its own interests. Similarly, in questions of belief and truth, it should be possible for anyone to come to the same conclusions.

All told, the method of science is empirical. It is a method rooted in observation and discovers things as they actually are. The method of science highlights errors and is self-corrective. It can be tested independent of our pet beliefs or dearest wishes.

John Dewey

In his lengthy *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell wrote, John Dewey (1859–1952) is “generally admitted to be the leading living philosopher in America.” Russell’s epithet tells you two things: it speaks to the importance of Dewey as a thinker and to the influence of pragmatic thought on American philosophy.

Charles Peirce’s emphasis had been on scientific inquiry and the manner of establishing beliefs. William James would broaden pragmatism’s outlook to include ideas in psychology, morality, metaphysics, and religion. Dewey’s own pragmatism consisted in developing an “instrumental” theory of truth. All three philosophers have in common that they were less interested in the origins of ideas than they were in the consequences of those ideas for the lives of individuals and the future in general.

The Life of John Dewey

John Dewey began his education inauspiciously. Then he opted for a college preparatory program at his local high school in Vermont. He completed the course so rapidly that he attended the University of Vermont at the age of sixteen. He pursued a classical education and was influenced by studying philosophy and the theory of evolution. After graduating he taught at a high school in Pennsylvania for two years before enrolling for a doctoral degree at Johns Hopkins University.

He finished his doctorate in 1884, then taught for ten years at the University of Michigan before heading for the University of Chicago in 1894. He had married Alice Chapman, who inspired his interest in social issues. His social consciousness was also raised by sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and social philosopher James Hayden Tufts (1862–1942).

At the University of Chicago he met people who would influence his own philosophy of education, such as educator Ella Flagg Young (1845–1918), whose Ph.D. he supervised and who was deeply involved in the University Laboratory School that Dewey founded. He also befriended social reformer — and eventual winner of the Nobel Peace Prize — Jane Adams (1860–1935).

Dewey moved to Columbia University in 1904, where his academic output in books and journal articles skyrocketed. His work also appeared in popular periodicals, such as the *Nation* and *New Republic*. His reputation outside academia grew. He traversed the globe, lecturing, observing schools, and writing reports on the educational institutions he studied. His biggest influence was undoubtedly in China, where his educational theories are still influential today.

Dewey retired in 1930 but continued his broad travel and work until his death in New York in 1952.

Instrumentalism

Dewey’s own version of pragmatism was called instrumentalism. He wished to replace the correspondence theory of truth — where true statements are defined as those that “correspond to reality” — to a new idea of “the truth is what works.”

Under the correspondence theory, if you say Force equals Mass times Acceleration, your statement is true if it corresponds to reality. But Dewey thought this was a “metaphysical” claim — for how can you know what “reality” is, beyond how it appears to you? You should agree or disagree with the hypothesis $F = MA$ because it works or doesn’t work. The hypothesis must have predictable consequences. The proof of an idea consists in it being subject to predictable results. In other words, in Dewey’s cumbersome expression: “According to experimental inquiry, the validity of the object of thought depends upon the consequences of the operations which define the object of thought.” Ideas that measure up to the criterion of truth possess “warranted assertibility,” which is a term Dewey substitutes for belief, knowledge, or proof.

Dewey accepted Peirce's idea that the object of scientific inquiry is belief. Inquiry originates in doubt and there are methods for overcoming that doubt, as Peirce said. But Dewey goes further in saying that the problem must be defined before you can reach a solution. You can only reach a solution by accepting observable facts. In his book *How We Think*, Dewey lays out five steps for solving problems:

- Step one is to observe the main components of a problem.
- In step two you think further about the problem to assess its complete difficulty and appreciate the larger context it is part of.
- In step three you make hypotheses that move toward a possible solution of it.
- The fourth step includes an analysis of your hypothesis in terms of past experience, choosing other potentially feasible solutions.
- The fifth step involves putting these possible solutions into practice experimentally or inductively and checking the results against your actual experiences.

You might picture Copernicus testing the heliocentric hypothesis in this fashion, checking it against his mathematical calculations and past hypotheses in order to confirm it. The five steps combined make up our reflective thinking.

Now his definition of truth shows its fuller meaning. Truth is a means of satisfying human needs. Truth is many things: useful, public, and objective; that is, it benefits society, not just the individual who discovers it. Pragmatists were united in the belief that practical consequences are the only valid test of truth, but it was Dewey who worked out these step-by-step procedures, starting with formulating the problem and moving toward a practical solution.

William James

William James (1842–1910) simplified and popularized pragmatic thought like no other thinker. "The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and to me, at definite times of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one," he said. What "difference" beliefs made was more obvious — and in some ways more important — than whether those beliefs are true. James was especially concerned with all of philosophy's "open" questions. This included the issues of morality, God's existence, free will and determinism, and immortality. He answered all of these in a pragmatic and personal way. He may not have answered them for everyone, but he answered them for himself in a manner that other found profitable.

Life

William James earned his medical degree from Harvard at the age of twenty-seven. But medicine's loss would become philosophy's gain. When he published *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, the field was still in its infancy. He made philosophy his full-time occupation and taught with Josiah Royce, George Santayana, and C. S. Pierce. "Pierce wrote as a logician and James as a humanist," Dewey said. James looked at the value of philosophy in terms of its contribution to his life. For James, the consequences of a belief were to be understood in terms of the personal and practical impact it has in the life of an individual.

Of belief in God, he wrote: "On pragmatist principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is 'true.'"

Similar to Dewey, truth for James is not correspondence, but involves asking, "What concrete difference will it make in anyone's actual life?" James says that true beliefs have the characteristic that "they pay" or have practical "cash value." He defines truth in terms of "what works," or "gives

satisfaction," or the "practical consequences" of a person's beliefs. "The true is whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief" and "Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events."

In response to his critics that his view is too subjective, he tries to provide criteria for truth: "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those we cannot..... In addition, as humans are constituted in point of fact, we find that to believe in other men's minds, in independent physical realities, in past events, in eternal logical relations, is satisfactory."