

## Pragmatism's Alternative to Foundationalism and Relativism

### *Introduction*

Pragmatists discuss a variety of philosophical topics including truth, reality, belief, inquiry, meaning, the good, justification, criteria, and conclude that there is no single Truth, Reality, Belief, Inquiry, Meaning, Good, Justification, or Criteria which stands antecedent to experience and with which we may measure or justify the accuracy or “correctness” of a belief or body of knowledge. To the pragmatist truth, reality, etc., don't work this way. There is no Truth by which we can measure all of our truths; no Good which tells us whether all of our acts are good or not. This way of looking at things has been upsetting to many philosophers. To these philosophers thinking in such a manner ends in what I will call radical relativism which assumes a world in which anything goes and nothing makes sense—one must either advocate *some* foundational basis for inquiry or, believe there is *no* foundational basis and hold any belief as true. In other words one can either believe that there is an objective Reality which we can Know by way of a single Method and set Criteria that leads to a Belief which is True, or, one can believe this to be impossible. And, concludes the criticism, if one believes this to be impossible, if one believes there is nothing antecedent to a fact or belief which justifies its truth-value, there is nothing to which we may, in a sense, hold our beliefs up to in order to verify their adequacy.

In this paper I will look at whether or not pragmatism, in arguing against the possibility of the establishment of such antecedent, is susceptible to the criticisms cited

above. I will argue that the pragmatists' claims successfully avoid the pit-falls of both objectivism/foundationalism and radical relativism. I will also suggest that pragmatism offers a viable alternate explanation of the nature of inquiry and knowledge in its proposal of a new direction for philosophy based on the consequences of belief rather than on antecedently prescriptive foundations and that this alternative offers new philosophical problems. In this paper I will consider the works of William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty who collectively put forth a coherent picture of pragmatism. I have chosen to discuss James and Rorty prior to Dewey because they present well formulated criticisms of the philosophies of their day. In making their criticisms explicit I will also present how James and Rorty suggest pragmatism avoids these criticisms. I will then bring John Dewey's theory of inquiry and experience into the discussion to more fully explicate the pragmatist's position. I will conclude with my own critical remarks on pragmatism.

Pragmatists maintain that certain dichotomies found in the practice of philosophy are the cause of certain errors which have proved problematic for philosophy itself. As Thomas M. Alexander notes, pragmatism's intention is to overcome "dichotomies between means and ends, practice and theory" (160) and, one could add, the subjective and objective, and determinate and indeterminate. Rorty suggests that one of the primary tasks of the pragmatist is to synthesize all problematic dichotomies in philosophy. This task rests on the fact that philosophical disputes are based on such dichotomies. For example ethical debates between deontological and consequentialist theories focus on whether means or ends are the ultimate justification of the moral worth of an act. A

metaphysical example can be found between arguments that the universe is either completely determined or has indeterminate elements. Pragmatists see these kinds of questions as consisting of never ending, fruitless debate. Instead, pragmatists want to suggest that we change the questions philosophy asks in order to yield more fruitful endeavors. In the next three sections of this essay I will explain how they suggest this is done.

### *James on Rationalism and Empiricism*

James begins his lectures on pragmatism by boldly stating that the history of philosophy has been a “certain clash of temperaments” (Pragmatism 19). The clash is between what he calls the “sentimental” and the “hard-hearted,” or, in more salient philosophical jargon, between rationalism and empiricism. “Temperament” here has an important significance. In his essay “The Will to Believe” James argues that belief has a non-rational element, something that is not dependent upon anything that could be considered a fact which can be objectively known through reason. I will address this after first spelling out the clash between rationalism and empiricism.

The rationalist, says James, is devoted to abstract principles, and is idealist, monistic and dogmatic. The foundation rationalists posit can be either supernatural, such as a god, or formal, such as logic. In either case the emphasis is on the fact that there is something beyond or outside the flux of experience which, if known, will yield immutable truth. The empiricist, on the other hand, is a “lover of facts,” materialistic,

pluralistic, and skeptical. Empiricists argue that knowledge is based upon the “given” of experience, or in other words, what we encounter in experience. Rationalism assumes foundationalism. Empiricism assumes all we may know are cold, hard facts about the objects of sense experience.

James does not dismiss rationalism and empiricism outright. He in fact agrees with aspects of both philosophical positions as I will show. What he argues is the common error of rationalism and empiricism is that they both assume what Dewey calls the “spectator theory of knowledge” and Rorty sees as philosophy playing the role of acting as a mirror of nature. What is meant by these slogans is the idea that objective knowledge and truth is possible by way of mere correspondence, whether this correspondence is thought to be between knowledge and some abstract principle, or between knowledge and the material world. In contrast with correspondence theories, James says pragmatism “converts the empty notion of a static relation of ‘correspondence’ between our minds and reality, into that of a rich and active commerce between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses,” (Pragmatism 55) and elsewhere, “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.” (Pragmatism 133) What James is suggesting is that we are not passive beholders of a pre-established world. Rather we are active participants in a world which persistently unfolds from the interaction of thought and the objects of thought.

James’s notion of truth, reality, etc., takes elements from both empiricism and rationalism. Like empiricism, James grounds justification in experience. But in contrast

with empiricism's claim that truth is obtained by a belief's correspondence with the facts of experience, James says truth arises in a process of practical verification. James sees a practical necessity for the use of abstract principles held by the rationalist as the means to obtain truth. But, as with empiricism, James holds these abstract principles as acting as tools for use in an investigative process. This process consists of a marriage of thought and action in experimentation, the results of which are measured as true by how they enable us to get along in the world, or, in James's words, "There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in concrete fact..." (Pragmatism 45) This implies that if two theories seemingly opposed at an abstract level have the same consequential effect in experience, there is no discernible difference. Or in other words, to the extent in which two theories result in the same consequences, they are identical. An example of this is found in the debate between idealism and materialism. If holding the belief that the world is mental results in the same consequences as holding the belief that the world is material, the two seemingly disparate theories are in fact no different from one another. They only differ to the extent in which they result in different consequences in experience.

Pragmatists want to change the very questions philosophy poses, such as that concerning whether the world is mental or material, as James notes in calling for a change to an "attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts." (Pragmatism 47). This way of looking at things takes into consideration, like empiricism, the particular facts of experience, and, like rationalism, the positing of abstract theories. But unlike empiricism,

pragmatism does not regard our ideas, theories, and knowledge as a mere static reflection of reality, but rather as an emergence coming out of our interaction with the world, which will be clarified in the section on Dewey. And unlike rationalism, pragmatism does not hold that abstract theories represent antecedently prescriptive rules to which we must adhere if we wish to be objective or find truth, but rather views abstract theories as tools or instruments that help or hinder our interaction with the world. In contrasting pragmatism with empiricism and rationalism, James blurs the line between theory and practice by viewing theories or abstract principles as a means of fulfilling desired results, and practice or experimentation as means of justification or verification of theories.

This returns us to James's claim that there is an inherent non-rational element to all belief with which I will end this section on James. In his essay entitled "The Will To Believe" James argues (as may be inferred from what has so far been stated) that we hold certain beliefs because of their use. "We want to believe" (Essays in Pragmatism 94) says James, and this want is derived not only from a desire to sustain life, but also from "Passional tendencies and volitions" (Essays in Pragmatism 95). What leads us to certain beliefs is the irritation caused by experiencing a state of doubt or uncertainty. What belief we come to hold is dependent upon numerous factors such as social context, familial upbringing, and personal experience; but what motivates us to hold any belief at all is a passion and value-laden desire to rest our doubts and uncertainties.

*Rorty: Epistemology and Hermeneutics*

Rorty too sees a dichotomy pervading the philosophy of his day. Rorty describes this dichotomy by using the terms Philosophy and philosophy or epistemology and hermeneutics. By Philosophy or epistemology Rorty means the belief that in order to know truths or what counts as good, one must obtain knowledge about some permanent, always binding Truth or Good that applies to all situations. This reiterates the idea James criticized that truth, the good, etc., are true, good, etc., by way of correspondence with Truth, the Good, etc. Rorty views Philosophy as sharing in the errors of rationalism and empiricism in the belief that truth either correspond to the transcendent, other-worldly (Platonists) or to the this-worldly (Positivists). By philosophy or hermeneutics is meant the belief, shared by the pragmatists, that the idea that there is one reality or one way in which knowledge corresponds to reality has proven itself to be an empty claim. One example Rorty uses to elucidate this concerns criteria. Criteria can take on many guises, such as accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness. “But the trade-offs between satisfaction of these various criteria provide room for endless rational debate” (Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature 327). We would in fact need some further criteria to justify one means of criteria as opposed to another, incompatible criteria. One can sense the regress here. Further, it is not as if we can step out of our experience in order to judge that experience (or the criteria by which we may with certainty know the truth of such an experience) with something beyond it. Rather, says the philosopher in opposition to the Philosopher, there are many entrances to many truths regarding any aspect of experience. And to the extent that these entrances, these beliefs, theories, and methods, work within the context of experience, they are true, but never immutably and eternally True. For

Rorty, philosophy (hermeneutics) has the role of comparing the various ways we talk about, theorize, and approach the world.

This brings us to the nature of language. Rorty says “we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there” (“The Contingency of Language” 109). Rather the world is out there and the truth is something found in language about the world. And, argues Rorty, if truth is found in language, and language is a human creation, then truth too is a human creation, not something independent of thought and language to which thought and language correspond. As further evidence to this claim Rorty points out the incommensurability of what he calls vocabularies, or, following the later Wittgenstein, language-games.

Vocabularies are just the different ways groups of people talk about the world. For Rorty, incommensurable means the fact that different vocabularies are unable to be brought under a single set of rules which will be able to determine which of the vocabularies are correct. Commensurability presupposes already agreed upon standards of practice. Yet different contexts are governed by different rules of language-use and standards of practice. For example to say it is true that it is not currently raining outside is very different from saying it is true that humans evolved from monkeys or that democracy is the best form of government. In the first case we need only look outside for verification. The second case requires an abundance of data collected from various scientific disciplines. The third requires a discussion of the nature of democracy, an analysis of its effects in practice, and a comparison between different cultures’ use of the democratic method. These three examples help illustrate the variety of meanings “truth” might have depending on the

context and language-game in which it is being used.

Rorty argues that it is one thing to regard a certain statement of a particular vocabulary as true within the prescriptive rules that govern that vocabulary. But when we increase our scope of discussion from statements and propositions to vocabularies as a whole we find there are no prescriptive rules which tell us how to choose between vocabularies. In Rorty's words, "When the notion of "description of the world" is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language-games to language-games as a whole...the idea that the world [or any other criteria outside of experience] decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense." ("The Contingency of Language" 109) This is not to say that the origin of vocabularies is something that is arbitrary but it *is* something other than criteria based. One can imagine many factors in the shaping of a vocabulary, from historical influences to cultural practices to accidental discoveries.

Discourse, says Rorty, is of two kinds. There is what he calls normal discourse which follows the criteria-governing rules of a particular vocabulary, and there is abnormal discourse which contrasts itself with normal discourse. Rorty says there are in turn two kinds of abnormal discourse, systematic and edifying. Systematic discourse is abnormal discourse intended to supplant or modify the normal discourse of established vocabularies. Edifying discourse intends to disrupt normal discourse without offering an alternative means of establishing a vocabulary grounded in criteria-governed rules. Whereas Philosophy or epistemology looks to establish an all encompassing set of criteria-governing rules by which all vocabularies may be judged and in so doing

eliminate abnormal discourse thus establishing a single and final vocabulary, philosophy or hermeneutics investigates, compares, and contrasts normal and abnormal discourses and in so doing bring to light the advantages and disadvantages of each. Rather than seeking some vocabulary to end all abnormal discourse, hermeneutics, as Rorty defines it, approaches discourses in a manner synonymous with the approach of pragmatism as stated by James—by looking at the consequences of particular vocabularies in practice.

Yet this is not to say that there is no need for epistemology or that epistemology is incompatible with hermeneutics. In fact the two are not only compatible but require one another. If there were no normal discourses as established and debated by “epistemologists,” then there would be nothing with which abnormal, edifying discourses could be set against. There would also be no starting points from which inquiry could begin. Rorty sees the necessity of established normal discourses and vocabularies but argues that these should not be seen as attempts to locate some final, all encompassing vocabulary. Rather, normal discourse should be seen as points of agreement and edifying discourse should be seen as contentions or disagreements with such standards of agreement. The philosopher’s task in dealing with the variety of normal and abnormal discourse, according to Rorty, is to investigate the pragmatic implications offered by the various vocabularies and reactions to these vocabularies.

*Dewey and the Determinate and Indeterminate*

Dewey’s theory of inquiry begins with the argument that inquiry would be

impossible where there not both determinate and indeterminate elements involved. He makes the stronger claim that there must be both determinate and indeterminate aspects to reality itself, not just our knowledge of it. This leads Dewey to propose that reality is not static, but rather what he calls “emergent.” This is based on the simple fact rarely taken into consideration in philosophical discourse: thought is just as much a state of affairs in existence as anything else, be it a physical object or functional process. We are too inclined to think of thought as being independent of and *about* reality or the world (spectator theory of knowledge) that we forget the fact that our thoughts about the world are in the world as well. If we accept that thought is in the world and not merely about it we can then recognize that, if thought is one aspect of reality and thought is about other aspects of reality, reality is relational. One aspect of reality, thought, can only exist as the thought of something. That something which thought is about, in conjunction with memories charged with emotional content, help shape thought. And thought, in return, shapes what is thought of in acts of expression. “Between the poles of aimless [indeterminate] and mechanical [determinate] efficiency, there lie those courses of action in which through successive deeds there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating toward an end that is felt as accomplishment of a process.” (“Having an Experience” 155) It is only in the face of the unknown that we inquire. And we are only able to inquire by use of what we have already come to know through experience.

In his discussion of experience, Dewey grants the empiricist claim that all knowledge is derived from the objects of experience. At its most basic and crude level, experience consists of raw sense data. Dewey notes its constant state of flux. At a more

refined level a dynamic process involving the culmination of and reflection on past experience, our desire to know that which affects us yet is unknown, and the constant undergoing by and redirecting of outside forces—in short, experimentation— enables us to hypothesize about how the world, which includes that which we experience and ourselves, works. This more refined experience in turn conditions how we experience the immediate objects of sense perception. This description of the way in which we acquire knowledge, as well as James's emphasis that justification is found in the consequences of beliefs, imply an interactive and transforming conception of truth, the good, etc. And reality emerges out of this interaction and transformation between thought and the world of experience.

Dewey's theory of inquiry attests to the claim that facts and value are intertwined. If facing the indeterminate aspects of existence is what prompts us to inquiry, then there is no such thing as disinterested knowledge. We wish to know in order to control, predict, and, in short, make life more agreeable and meaningful. Yet Dewey also notes that "when [belief] is viewed as fixed and final in itself it is a source of oppression to the heart and paralysis to imagination" (Experience and Nature 11). We have both an interest in controlling the world for our purposes and a need for the presence of indeterminacy in order to derive qualitative value from experience. This contradictory position is not a vicious cycle of a never ending antagonism, but an essential compulsory force required for experience to occur.

It is through a process of change that meaning is formed. The formation of meaning is the emergence of reality. Reality then is not some static world independent of

our experience, but rather the continued interplay of consciousness and the objects of consciousness, which continually shape and reshape one another. In this interplay, which Dewey argues is what constitutes experience, the fine line between mind and matter is erased. Reaching such a conclusion leads the pragmatists to focus on the method of inquiry rather than some fixed ends reached by inquiry.

### *Method*

By tracing the common thread connecting these discussion of James, Rorty, and Dewey we can get a clearer sense of what the pragmatists are saying. James's criticism of rationalism and empiricism shares affinities with Rorty's discussion of epistemology and hermeneutics in that rationalism and epistemology claim the possibility of reaching immutable foundations upon which knowledge and belief can be justified. Dewey's argument that there are determinate and indeterminate elements in reality would imply that there can be no definitive foundations upon which all knowledge can rest. Rorty's distinction between normal and abnormal discourse is essentially the recognition of the determinate and indeterminate in linguistic practice. Dewey makes it clear that if there were no indeterminate elements to reality inquiry would be impossible, and further that we would not experience the world as conscious beings. This implies that normal discourse would be unrecognizable without the challenges of abnormal discourse. Yet there could likewise be no abnormal discourse without normal discourse. And, there would be no means of approaching the indeterminate without some determinate aspects

of reality and belief. What is needed is an approach which starts from determinate aspects of reality and normal discourses and tests these apparent solid foundations by application in the world of experience. James and Dewey have advocated the scientific method as such an approach.

The initial articulation of the scientific method as the pragmatists view it is set out in Peirce's essay entitled "The Fixation of Belief." In this essay Peirce describes four methods of belief: the methods of authority, tenacity, a priori, science. He dismisses the method of authority, which resolves inquiry by appeal to some authority, and the a priori method, which resembles rationalism in attempting to locate immutable foundations by which to reach conclusions about the world, as both lacking a means of verification and thus a way of checking beliefs derived by such methods. The method of tenacity is to hold beliefs for the sheer comfort of holding beliefs, but without investigating whether or not these beliefs are in line with the evidence afforded by experience. In all these methods there is a disregard for testing and verifying the claims presented by each method. Only the scientific method offers a means by which to reach and verify beliefs.

It is important to note that it is not the conclusions of science which the pragmatists advocate as exemplary of correct belief. It is rather the method of science, the method of checking and verifying beliefs through interaction with the world, by experimenting to see what happens. This brings back James's call to look at consequences of belief for validation of a theory. This also shows that the pragmatists are not dismissive of abstract thought outright. They view abstract thought as tools with which to experiment in the world, viewing the results of such experimentation as support for the

further use of the abstract thought or theory. The scientific method includes a willingness to drop theories where they do not apply just as, for example, we do not use a hammer to shovel snow.

The scientific method, as the pragmatists view it, emphasizes the necessity of verification via experimentation, but the pragmatists do not hold a verificationist theory of meaning. Verification is what keeps a theory alive and usable, but we do not derive meaning and knowledge from verification. It is merely the evidence needed as support that a theory or belief works in application. Meaning, for the pragmatist, is found in *how* or in what way a belief or theory works.

From what has been said it is evident that the pragmatist views any justification for what is considered true and good must be found in the consequences of what is being considered, or, in what that under consideration does in practice. Belief should be maintained only by a method of inquiry which tests and retests the implications that come about from the holding of a belief, which must always be held a fallible. Although we should settle our beliefs in an established agreement between members of a community, we, as individuals and as communities, should never dogmatically hold our beliefs as the only possible correct view. We must also, if we follow the pragmatic train of thought, not allow ourselves to hold beliefs unchecked by application in experience. Lastly, we should caution ourselves against holding beliefs or methods of inquiry not rooted in the particularities and flux of experience.

### *Concluding Remarks*

It is evident that pragmatists avoid a foundationalist approach to philosophical thought. And their criticism of foundationalism seems hard to dispute. The mere recognition that we can not set outside of experience to judge whether our beliefs hold true to a reality independent of experience, is enough evidence to suggest the impossibility of ever reaching some purely objective knowledge about the world. Also from the pragmatists we can realize that even if absolute knowledge were possible, if reached we would be reduced to non-inquiring automata. Yet we may rest assured this will never happen due to the indeterminate elements of reality and our need and desire for change and growth.

The pragmatists also avoid the conclusion that any belief is justifiable. By emphasizing the consequences of belief in practice we may safely disregard many dubious theories and beliefs. Pragmatism offers a theory of inquiry and knowledge that maintains the relevance rather than the relativity of belief. This implies a contextual scheme of inquiry. What works in certain circumstances may not work in others, and what is relevant today may prove useless tomorrow.

Rorty says pragmatists “do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that “there is no such thing” as Truth or Goodness. Nor do they have a “relativistic” or “subjectivistic” theory of Truth or Goodness. They would simply like to change the subject” (“Pragmatism and Philosophy” 27). If we accept the pragmatists’ claims, the subject and questions of philosophy will no longer be based on finding ultimate truths and what the good is independent of experience and practice. In

the pragmatic scheme of things the subject under discussion must concern by what means we can indicate which theories work and when. It is not sufficient for a theory to merely “work” in experience, for we must ask what it means for a theory to work at all. In the past people have gotten along in the world with many beliefs that would now seem to not work at all. And one can assume our beliefs will be looked at similarly in the distant future. This suggests that theories and beliefs evolve with the contextual scheme of society and the world at large. It would seem that there is no one answer to the question of what works. Rather, this is a reflective question we must constantly pose to ourselves and our communities. It is this question that should occupy philosophical discourse which has the intent of improving the nature of humankind, and the very question of what constitutes improvement and progress is a question that should never leave the table of philosophical debate.

In conclusion I would like to suggest an implication derived from the pragmatists’ emphasis on methodology rather than fixed ends. This emphasis suggests that the means toward any end are ends in themselves and that in all of our actions and activities, if we wish such actions and activities to have intrinsic meaning and value, we must not only pursue desired ends, but give equal importance to the pursuit and means by which these ends are reached.

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