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 “Pragmatism in the Context of Modern Philosophy”

THE UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF PRAGMATIST THOUGHT

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Introduction

This paper revisits the issue of *the unity vs. diversity of pragmatism*. As is well known, this topic was explored almost immediately after pragmatism had been introduced by William James and other classical figures as a new philosophical method and orientation – Arthur Lovejoy’s critical analysis “thirteen pragmatisms” is a famous early contribution – and the discussion was intensified again in the 1980s when several scholars of classical pragmatism accused leading neopragmatists of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the pragmatist tradition. For example, it has been argued – in my view compellingly – that Richard Rorty’s radically antirepresentationalist conception of pragmatism is based on problematic understanding of what pragmatism originally was or is. However, I will suggest in this paper that it can be argued, applying the pragmatic method itself, that the question concerning unity vs. diversity must itself be examined pragmatically, i.e., in terms of the potential difference it makes in our pragmatist philosophizing.

For antiessentialist pragmatists, there can hardly be any timeless, ahistorical, universal essence of pragmatism (that is, no single fundamental criterion that pragmatist thought must fulfill, distinguishing pragmatism from other philosophical methods or frameworks), but on the other hand pragmatism cannot be defined so widely that “anything goes” within it. The need to find a balance between these implausible extremes – a search for a pragmatically workable “middle ground” in this metaphilosophical issue – will be illuminated by drawing attention to the relation between pragmatism and some other modern philosophical orientations, including Wittgensteinian philosophy in particular. Arguably, there is, then, both unity and diversity in pragmatism; pragmatism is (to employ a Wittgensteinian expression) a family resemblance notion, and pragmatist philosophizing is at its most fruitful, or most pragmatic, when it enters into a constructive dialogue with other methods and strategies of philosophical inquiry.

Four views on the integrity of the pragmatist tradition

Arguably (as I have suggested on a number of earlier occasions, including my introduction to a recent reference work that I edited, *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism*, 2011), one can adopt at least four different, though perhaps overlapping, attitudes to what has been labeled “the pragmatist tradition”.

First, some scholars have claimed that only Charles S. Peirce’s own philosophical method, first formulated in the 1870s but in 1905 famously re-baptized as “pragmaticism”, is a piece of solid philosophy and that all subsequent formulations of pragmatism were, and continue to be, distortions or misunderstandings of Peirce’s original views. This, however, is an extremely one-sided and dogmatic view. In serious pragmatism scholarship today, no one can plausibly deny the fact that William James and John Dewey, as well as Josiah Royce, George Herbert Mead, and C.I. Lewis, among others, also produced original philosophical systems, even though they were all indebted to Peirce in many ways and at least some of them probably did to some extent misunderstand or misapply some of Peirce’s ideas. Their developments of the *pragmatic method* are a case in point: when James extended Peirce’s original principle of making our scientific concepts clear into ethics and religion, he perhaps slightly mischaracterized Peirce’s ideas but at the same time quite deliberately changed the meaning of the pragmatic maxim, thereby extending the original scope of pragmatism in order to make the method more relevant in inquiries into ethics and religion, in particular.

Secondly, several philosophers have insisted on the primacy of Peirce's version of pragmatism while admitting that there are interesting and important non-Peircean developments to be found within the tradition. In contrast to the first group of scholars, for whom there is only one true pragmatism, these philosophers – including, e.g., H.O. Mounce and Nicholas Rescher – maintain that there are essentially “two pragmatisms”: Peirce's original *realist* views have gradually been transformed, via James's, Dewey's and others' contributions to the pragmatist tradition, to something completely different, namely, Rorty's *antirealist* and *relativist* neopragmatism (which Rorty himself refused to characterize as “relativist”, though). The “two pragmatisms” picture thereby assumes a strict dichotomy between Peircean pragmatism, on the one hand, and all later, inferior pragmatist systems, on the other.

Thirdly, one may insist on the *continuity* of certain pragmatist themes in all the classics of the movement, especially Peirce, James, and Dewey but also including Royce, F.C.S. Schiller, Mead, and Lewis. These themes include, e.g., philosophical notions such as experience, purposiveness, human interest, continuity, creativity, growth, habit (of action), (non-reductive) naturalism, all of them receiving specifically pragmatist interpretations and elaborations. For example, the concept of experience, as developed by pragmatists, is dynamic and active, hence quite different from, say, the classical British empiricists' static and passive notion of experience. Those adopting this third approach (e.g., Susan Haack, Sandra Rosenthal, and many others) usually insist, however, that neopragmatists like Rorty have seriously distorted original pragmatism. This group finds considerably more unity in the pragmatist tradition than the first two, but still prefers to continue to learn from the classics of the movement instead of developing neopragmatism.

Finally, there is a fourth attitude, adopted (I think) by myself and fortunately many others as well today. The one maintaining this attitude is prepared to admit that even Rorty's neopragmatism is part of the extremely heterogeneous tradition we may call pragmatism. There are both unity and enormous differences among the pragmatists – within this one and the same dynamically developing tradition whose amorphousness is a sign of its philosophical strength and vitality rather than of distortion or corruption. It is, however, compatible with this attitude, emphasizing both the unity and the differences-in-unity of the pragmatist tradition, to attack, say, Rorty's (mis)readings of the classical pragmatists. Internal critique of pragmatism is, crucially, part of pragmatism itself. Moreover, this fourth position acknowledges that pragmatism – as well as, possibly, any other truly living philosophical tradition – is to a great extent constituted by the open question regarding who is to be classified as a thinker belonging to this tradition, and on which criteria. It is, furthermore, well compatible with this flexible attitude to the tradition to encourage “new pragmatisms” (to quote the title of Cheryl Misak's 2007 collection, *New Pragmatism*), contributions to epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, and other fields that need not have any explicit connection with the historical tradition of pragmatism but that nevertheless develop somewhat similar views and arguments.

When defining pragmatism and distinguishing it from other philosophies one must always carefully consider the *pragmatic purpose* such definitions and distinctions are taken to serve. Are we seeking the final truth about what pragmatism essentially is (or was) in order to be able to tell “true” pragmatists apart from those who distort the tradition? And if so, do we believe that the “true” pragmatism thus distinguished from its actual and possible distortions will help us in solving some particular philosophical (or historical and interpretive) problems? In many cases, there may be good pragmatic reasons for resisting such attempts to establish a pragmatist orthodoxy. It may be advisable to leave the exact status of pragmatism open, to look and see what kinds of different philosophies and philosophers (as well as non-philosophers) are discussed under the rubric “pragmatism”, and to try to develop context-sensitive philosophical reasons for considering or for refusing to consider some particular line of thought a form of pragmatism. The nature of pragmatism will then be continuously open to debate, and there is no pressing pragmatic need to finally conclude such a debate any time soon.

Pragmatism and other contemporary philosophical approaches

I concluded the *Continuum Companion to Pragmatism*, mentioned in the previous section, with a chapter on the “new directions” of pragmatism today. In that chapter, I included a brief comparison of pragmatism with some other major current philosophical orientations. Let me here recapitulate the main points of that discussion.

First, pragmatism clearly shares with *analytic philosophy* the emphasis on argumentative rigor and conceptual clarity (though relatively few pragmatists are willing to phrase their arguments in formal language). What pragmatism does not share with (at least some parts of) analytic philosophy is the occasional narrow-mindedness of the latter. Contemporary analytic debates in epistemology, metaphysics, or the philosophy of mind are often relatively narrowly focused in the sense that philosophical voices from outside the analytic tradition itself – from, say, pragmatism or phenomenology or Wittgenstein studies – are not taken seriously at all. Pragmatism scholarship, in my view, is at its best when it truly communicates with other traditions, including of course analytic philosophy; against philosophical specialization of various stripes it can demonstrate the fruitfulness of listening to “other voices”. As there are no good reasons for analytic philosophers to ignore relevant pragmatist contributions – even though, for instance, Peirce’s scholastic realism is, unbelievably, hardly ever discussed in the context of analytic metaphysics, although it offers crucial insights into generality and modality that could transform the entire analytic debate – nor are there any better reasons for pragmatists to be militant anti-analytic philosophers.

Secondly, pragmatism shares with *phenomenology* the attempt to draw attention to (subjective or intersubjective, as well as dynamic and embodied) experience. However, it does not accept some phenomenologists’ foundationalist approaches that seek to offer an a priori foundation for the sciences, for instance – nor the related dream of what may be called philosophical presuppositionlessness, the attempt to begin one’s inquiries from an absolutely certain standpoint with all “natural” presuppositions, including even the belief in the reality of a natural world, “bracketed”. In the interest of opening a genuine dialogue with Husserlian, Heideggerian, and Merleau-Pontyan phenomenologists, the pragmatist may refer to Peirce’s own peculiar phenomenology (phaneroscopy) as well as to James’s and Dewey’s concerns with “pure” or “primary” experience, but the point I am trying to make here is broader. Pragmatism and phenomenology can join forces in reconsidering our philosophical methodologies at a fundamental level. It could even be investigated whether the so-called pragmatic method (the pragmatic maxim) and the phenomenological method (or the phenomenological reduction) could be interpreted not as mutually exclusive or contrasting methodologically choices but as mutually supporting ones, both of which could be employed in philosophical attempts to understand our experience as it emerges within habits of action.

Thirdly, our being-in-the-world – to use Heideggerian terminology – can be seen as a basic problem in pragmatism. This problem, obviously, is something that pragmatism shares with *existentialism* and *hermeneutics*. Together with these in many ways rather different philosophical orientations, pragmatism emphasizes our self-understanding, as well as our need to take seriously our finitude and mortality as defining our existential situation as well as the resulting turn toward the future, to the ways in which the experienced world opens to us in our inevitably finite horizon. In Sartrean jargon, “man is a project”, never completed, and this is something that most pragmatists would be happy to subscribe to – without, however, subscribing to the thesis that human existence is absurd. It is precisely by understanding ourselves as incomplete projects that we may revolt against absurdity.

Fourthly, pragmatism – or at least some currents within Deweyan pragmatism aiming at a viable account of democracy, in particular – are at least as actively political and as seriously investigating the possibility of socio-cultural transformation in contemporary societies as *critical theory* (or the Frankfurt School), despite the latter’s key representatives’, especially Max Horkheimer’s, uncompromising critique of pragmatism as an approach allegedly naively based on instrumental reason. What pragmatism does not share with critical theory is the latter’s deep cultural pessimism. Pragmatism looks toward the future and, for example, to the development of modern technology melioristically and hence more open-mindedly,

refusing to allow technological determinism and pessimism to overshadow the positive promises inherent in the development of new methods of thinking and acting in the world.

Fifthly, and finally, pragmatism is (as repeatedly argued in some of my previous work, including *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View*, 2003; and *Pragmatist Metaphysics*, 2009) reinterpretable as a form of (Kantian-like though clearly not orthodoxly Kantian) *transcendental philosophy*. In particular, pragmatism emphasizes the kind of *reflexivity* – the self-reflection of human reason and intelligence, as rooted in our practices – that has been a cornerstone of transcendental philosophy since Kant. However, as noted in connection with phenomenology, pragmatism is not at all happy with transcendental philosophers' aim to provide an aprioristic first foundation for philosophy and science. There is, and can be, no “first philosophy”; here the pragmatist attitude is deeply fallibilist. Everything, including the transcendental conditions we may identify as necessary for the possibility of certain given human actualities (e.g., experience or meaning), is revisable and reinterpretable in the course of our ongoing experience and inquiry.

Most of the philosophical traditions or schools here only very briefly compared to pragmatism are unfortunately somewhat narrow-minded and shortsighted when it comes to seeking and maintaining communicative relations outside one's own approach. The same is, admittedly, true about pragmatism. All too often pragmatists just debate among themselves over what pragmatism actually is or who should (or should not) be called a pragmatist. Such debates do play an important role in keeping pragmatism an open tradition, but they may also to some extent hinder the development of dialogues between pragmatism and other orientations. The pragmatic attitude itself would strongly favor encouraging such dialogue.

Insofar as pragmatism – or the pragmatic method – amounts to a philosophical attempt to understand human being-in-the-world reflexively from within the practices in which that being-in-the-world is manifested, it is not primarily, let alone exclusively, a philosophical *theory* about anything more specific than that, although it is highly relevant in a number of theoretical discussions in various areas of philosophy. Pragmatism may not be immediately applicable to philosophical or scientific problems, but then again pragmatists are, or should be, suspicious of the very idea of *applying* philosophical theory to some practical problem. Good philosophy is always already “applied” simply by being humanly relevant. On the other hand, pragmatism is certainly not independent of the surrounding scientific disciplines. Our philosophical attempts to understand ourselves and the world we live in often emerge from the developments of the empirical sciences. In addition to the dialogues between rival philosophical schools, pragmatism should promote *interdisciplinary* dialogues in inquiry, especially across the supposed gulf between the human and the natural sciences.

Taking all of this into account, I cannot think of a better categorization for pragmatism than the one according to which pragmatism is a form of *philosophical anthropology*. Like pragmatism itself, this field of philosophical inquiry virtually extends through philosophy as a whole. Metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and many other issues often classified as belonging to different sub-fields of philosophy are all crucial, and entangled, in philosophical anthropology. The pragmatist is a philosophical anthropologist in the sense of considering all these and other philosophical topics in terms of human practices and habits – of human culture not to be distinguished from nature. Thus, pragmatism may in fact be promising in contemporary philosophy also because it may be able to make philosophical anthropology flourish again as a philosophical program. This is at least one of the potential new directions that pragmatists may look forward to.

Pragmatism and Wittgensteinianism

Let me conclude this paper by a brief discussion of pragmatism and Wittgensteinian philosophy – even though, historically, there is little to be added to the already existing scholarship on the relation between Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy and the pragmatist tradition. Russell Goodman's monograph, *Wittgenstein and William James* (2002), tells us most that is worth telling about this issue, at least insofar as we are

concerned with Wittgenstein's relation to James. There are, however, a number of (both historical and systematic) issues in contemporary Wittgenstein scholarship that could be fruitfully re-examined from a pragmatist perspective.

For example, in recent Wittgenstein studies, several noted scholars (including James Conant, Cora Diamond, and Rupert Read) have suggested that Wittgenstein's philosophy is completely different from any traditional attempts to philosophize in terms of theses and arguments. Those are to be rejected as little more than remnants of "dogmatic" ways of doing philosophy. Instead of engaging with theses and arguments, philosophy should be therapeutic and deconstructive, helping us get rid of assumptions that lead us to philosophical pseudo-problems in the first place. The so-called "New Wittgensteinians", taking very seriously Wittgenstein's famous encouragement to "drop the ladder" toward the end of the *Tractatus* and his later proposal in the *Philosophical Investigations* to lead philosophical thought to "peace", advance this therapeutic-deconstructive program.

From a pragmatist point of view, we can again perceive a misleadingly dichotomous opposition between implausible extremes at work here. To defend a modestly traditional conception of philosophy as a systematic, argumentative practice employing theses and arguments supporting those theses is not to be a dogmatic believer in any particular philosophical system. As a brief illustration of this, I suggest that, despite his criticism of traditional ways of doing philosophy, Wittgenstein can be seen as employing pragmatic versions of Kantian-styled *transcendental arguments* (e.g., the private language argument) in favor of certain philosophical conceptions (e.g., the view that our language is necessarily public). The private language argument can be regarded as transcendental precisely because the fact that language is public is, as a result of this argument, claimed to be a necessary condition for the very possibility of linguistic meaning. A private language would not be a language at all; as Wittgenstein notes, rules cannot be followed privately. Similarly, it could be argued on the basis of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* that, necessarily, there must be agreement about certain apparently empirical matters ("hinges", e.g., our basic conviction about the earth having existed for a long time and not just for, say, five minutes) in order for meaningful use of language to be possible at all. I am not making any claims about the success of these or any other Wittgensteinian arguments, but it seems to me clear that Wittgenstein can be plausibly read as employing a "pragmatized" transcendental method of examining the necessary practice-embedded conditions for the possibility of something (e.g., meaningful language) whose actuality we take as given.

Analogously, the pragmatists can also be reinterpreted as philosophers presenting and evaluating such transcendental arguments (or, more broadly, transcendental considerations and inquiries), even though neopragmatists like Rorty have tried to depict not only Wittgenstein but also James and Dewey in a deconstructive manner, as some kind of precursors of both Wittgensteinian therapy and Derridean deconstruction (and postmodernism generally). For a pragmatist, there is no reason at all to resort to any unpragmatic dichotomy between transcendental philosophical theory and philosophy as a therapeutically relevant practical activity. Rather, philosophical theorizing itself is, inevitably, a practice-embedded human activity.

A healthy pragmatism should, then, instead of relying on an essentialist dichotomy between post-philosophical therapy and systematic argumentation, insist on the compatibility and deep complementarity of deconstruction and reconstruction. The deconstruction of philosophical problems and ideas should always be followed by a reconstruction. This is in effect what Dewey argued in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920); as Hilary Putnam later put it in *Renewing Philosophy* (1992), "deconstruction without reconstruction is irresponsibility". The crude dichotomy between therapeutic and systematic philosophy is completely unpragmatic, as it assumes an essentialistic conception of *the* proper way of doing philosophy, without letting the richness of different philosophical aims, methods, and conceptions flourish. It thinks before looking, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase; or, to adopt a Peircean expression, it blocks the road of inquiry. Our philosophical inquiries often need both deconstruction and reconstruction; therefore, to one-sidedly restrict proper philosophizing to only one of these impedes philosophical understanding.

There are many other debates in Wittgenstein scholarship to which a pragmatist perspective would offer insightful (but often neglected) perspectives. For instance, three key issues of Wittgenstein studies provide particularly useful insights into the ways in which Wittgenstein, or the contemporary “Wittgensteinian” philosopher, could be regarded as a pragmatist: the distinction – invoked in recent discussions of *On Certainty*, in particular – between *the propositional and the non-propositional*; the related tension between anti-Cartesian *fallibilism* and what has been called (by Stanley Cavell) *the “truth in skepticism”* in Wittgenstein; as well as the relation between *metaphysics and the criticism of metaphysics* in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and Wittgensteinian philosophy more generally. I believe it can be plausibly argued that dichotomous readings of Wittgenstein in terms of these three philosophical (or metaphilosophical) oppositions lead to unpragmatist and even un-Wittgensteinian positions, just as the dichotomy between theoretical (constructive) and therapeutic (deconstructive) does. Space does not allow me to develop these thoughts here, though.

Conclusion

To be a pragmatist, or (analogously) to be a Wittgensteinian thinker, today is to be continuously reflexively – transcendently, as we may say – concerned with one’s own philosophical perspectives and approaches, not only with their intellectual but more broadly with their ethical integrity. It is to turn one’s self-critical gaze toward one’s own practices of philosophizing, one’s own being-in-the-world, one’s own habits of action, intellectual as well as more concretely practical. In James’s terms, it is to take full responsibility of one’s individual “philosophical temperament” and to self-critically develop it further, through one’s contextualizing inquiries, hopefully learning to listen to the richness of the human “voices” speaking to us from within the indefinite plurality of language-games that our fellow human beings play with each other and with us. Among these language-games are the contributions of earlier and contemporary thinkers to the pragmatist tradition. To let that tradition flourish, we must not artificially restrict it. However, I have tried to suggest here that this permissive and flexible attitude to the integrity of pragmatism need not, and must not, give up critical and normative (meta)philosophical reflection on proper ways of philosophizing.

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