

# VII. THE 20th CENTURY

Let us cross at last from old Europe to the New World and visit the PRAGMATISTS—a school that makes the first truly American contribution to the history of philosophy, and one that also provides a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The logician and semiologist CHARLES PEIRCE (1839–1914) invented the term pragmatism and meant it to be the name of a method whose primary goal was the clarification of thought. Perhaps pragmatism was conceived in Peirce's mind when he read the definition of "BELIEF" offered by the psychologist Alexander Bain. Belief is "that upon which a man is prepared to act," said Bain. Peirce agreed and decided that it followed from this definition that beliefs produced habits, and that the way to distinguish between beliefs was to compare the habits they produced. Beliefs, then, were rules for action, and they got their meaning from the action for which they were rules. With this definition, Peirce has bypassed the privacy and secrecy of the Cartesian mind and had provided a direct access to mental processes (because a person's belief could be established by observing that person's actions).

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Providing Direct Access to the

Cartesian Mind

belief.

Peirce's essay,

"How to Make our

Ideas Clear," published in 1878, was generally ignored until interpreted by WILLIAM JAMES (1842–1910) some twenty-five years later. James swore allegiance to what he took to be Peircean principles and set about to promote the doctrine of pragmatism. But Peirce was so chagrined at what James was doing to pragmatism that he changed its name to "pragmatism," which he said was "ugly enough to be safe enough from kidnapers." Where Peirce had meant for pragmatism merely to provide a



Ugly Enough to Be Safe  
from Kidnappers

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formula for making ordinary thought more scientific, James saw it as a philosophy capable of resolving metaphysical and religious dilemmas. Furthermore, he saw it as both a theory of meaning and a theory of truth. Let us first look at James's pragmatic theory of meaning. In *Pragmatism*, he wrote:

Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world: and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.

James concluded from this the following principle:

"There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere."

To clarify James's point, we will take three sentences, each quite different from the others, and test them for pragmatic meaning:

- A. "Steel is harder than flesh."
- B. "There is a Bengal tiger loose outside."
- C. "God exists."

From a pragmatic point of view, the meanings of (A) and (B) are unproblematic. We know exactly what it would be like to believe them, as opposed to believing their opposites. If we believed an alternative to (A), it is clear that in many cases we would behave very differently from the way we do behave now. An what we believe about (B) will also have an immediate impact on our behavior. What about



(C)? Here we see what James himself would admit to be the subjective feature of his theory of meaning. If certain people believed that God existed, they would conceive of the world very differently from the way they would conceive of it if they believed God did not exist. However, there are other people whose conceptions of the world would be practically identical (i.e., identical in practice) whether they believed that God did or did not exist. For these people, the propositions "God exists" and "God does not exist" would mean (practically) the same thing. For certain other people who find themselves somewhere between these two extremes, the proposition "God exists" means something like this: "On Sunday, I put on nice clothes and go to church." That is because, for them, engaging in this activity is the only practical outcome of their belief (and a belief just is a rule for action, as Peirce had said).



A Pragmatic Proof of God's Existence

So much for the pragmatic theory of meaning. Now for the pragmatic theory of truth. James had this to say about truth: ". . . ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just insofar as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, . . . Truth in our ideas means their power to 'work.'" James also said (perhaps less felicitously) that the issue was that of the "cash value" of ideas.

If we return to our three model sentences, we will see that (A) certainly works. Believing that steel is harder than flesh definitely puts us in a much more satisfactory relation to the rest of our experience than does believing the opposite. For most of us, (B) usually does not work. Under typical conditions, believing that there is a Bengal tiger loose outside the room we now occupy would put us in a paranoid relation with the rest of our experience. Of course, sometimes believing it to be true would work. (Namely, we are tempted to say, when there really is a tiger outside.)



What about the third example? Obviously, the truth or falsity of the claim that God exists cannot even come up for those people for whom there is no practical difference whether they believe it or not. But for those people for whom the distinction is meaningful, the pragmatic test of truth is available. Unlike the cases of (A) and (B), there is no direct pragmatic test of the proposition "God exists." In fact, the empirical evidence, according to James, is equally indecisive for or against God's existence. About this and similar cases, James said, "Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds." (In saying this, James sounded very much like Kant.) James went on to say that for many, the belief in God does work, though he was prepared to admit that for a few it did not work. Rather, it put them in a state of paranoic fear vis-à-vis the rest of their experiences. So, for the first group, the proposition "God exists" is true, and for the second group, it is false.



For Some, a Belief in God Definitely Has Cash Value

It was this subjective side of James's theory of truth that displeased many, including Peirce. This feature of pragmatism was somewhat ameliorated by the work of JOHN DEWEY. First, one last point about James: The allusion earlier to the similarity between him and Kant is not gratuitous. Both Kant and James tried to justify on practical grounds our right to hold certain moral and religious values that could not be justified on purely intellectual grounds. Furthermore, just as Kant had seen himself as trying to mediate between the rationalists and the empiricists, so did James see himself as mediating between what he called the "tender-minded" and the "tough-minded" philosophers:

The Tender-Minded	The Tough-Minded
Rationalistic (going by "principles") Intellectualistic Idealistic Optimistic Religious Free-willist Monistic Dogmatical	Empiricist (going by "facts") Sensationalistic Materialistic Pessimistic Irreligious Fatalistic Pluralistic Skeptical

The trouble with these alternatives, said James, was that "you find an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough, and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough. . . ." Obviously, James thought that his pragmatism offered a third, more satisfying alternative.

JOHN DEWEY (1859-1952) was perhaps the most influential of the pragmatists—if for no other reason than that he outlived them by so many years.



permanent dent in Dewey's way of thinking, contextualizing as it did all philosophy in terms of history, society, and culture.

But under the influence of James and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Dewey drifted away from Hegelianism. Where Hegel found humanity progressing by resolving certain logical contradictions in the ideational sphere, Dewey



Huey, Dewey, and Louie

He was actually schooled in Hegelian idealism (which in the second half of the nineteenth century had a great impact on American and British philosophy, as we will see), and it left a



Hegel Putting a Permanent Dent in Dewey's Thought

found progress in the resolution of certain organic conflicts between individuals and their social and natural environments. From Darwin, Dewey learned that consciousness, mind, and intellect were not something different from nature, opposed to it and standing in splendid aloofness above it; rather, they were adaptations to nature, continuous with it, and like other appendages of plants, insects, and animals, functioned best when used to solve problems posed to them by the natural world.

Such an idea fit easily into the schema of the pragmatism of Peirce and James. For James, however, pragmatism had been a therapeutic tool for dealing primarily with certain religious conflicts in individual psychology. Dewey was more interested in social psychology. His basic philosophical interests were in politics, education, and morality.



Jamesian Therapy

According to Dewey, as ways of solving problems, higher organisms develop learned routines that transcend purely instinctual responses. We call these routines "habits." As the organism's environment becomes more ambiguous and the organism itself becomes more complex, its responses become more "mental." Intelligence evolves when habit fails to perform efficiently. Intelligence interrupts and delays a response to the environment when a problematic situation is recognized as problematic. Thought is, in fact, a "response to the doubtful as such." The function of reflective thought is to turn obscurity into clarity. Such a transformation is called "knowledge." Knowledge "marks a question answered, a difficulty disposed of, a confusion cleared up, an inconsistency reduced to coherence, a perplexity mastered." Ideas are plans for action. They are "designations of operations to be performed"; they are hypotheses. Thinking is simply "deferred action." Thoughts that do not pass into actions that rearrange experience are useless thoughts. (The same is true of philosophies.)



Ideas Are Deferred Actions

Traditional epistemologists, whether rationalist or empiricist, have erred. They believed that what was to be known was some reality preexisting the act of knowing. For them, the mind is the mirror of reality. Dewey calls this "the spectator theory of knowledge." It sought to find certainty, either in "universals" (rationalism) or in "sense data" (empiricism). But universals and sense data are not the objects of knowledge; rather, they are the instruments of knowledge. One of the consequences of all this is that philosophy must abandon "ultimate questions concerning Being and Knowledge in themselves, and must recognize that knowledge does not encompass the world as a whole." Strictly speaking then, the object of knowledge is constructed by the inquiring mind. Knowledge changes the world that existed prior to its being known, but not in the Kantian sense in which it distorts reality ("the noumenal world"), rather in the sense that it imposes new traits on the world, for example, by clarifying that which was inherently unclear.

The definition of the world as the totality of substances (things) was abandoned with the advent of modern science, which revealed not "objects" but relationships. In abandoning that definition, science also dissolved the distinction between KNOWING and DOING. Galileo is credited by Dewey for initiating this revolution, which all but philosophers have accepted. Science allows us to escape from the tyranny of the past and allows us to exert some control over our natural and social environment. And yet, it is not only scientists who "know." Poets, farmers, teachers, statespeople, and dramatists know. Nevertheless, ultimately all must look to the scien-

tists for a methodology. In fact, science is just a sophisticated form of common sense. Science, or its strategies, should play the role in the contemporary world that the Church played in the medieval world. Scientific techniques must be applied both to the development of values and of social reform.



**Science Must Take Over the Role Played by the Medieval Church**

For Dewey, there is no dichotomy between scientific facts and values. Values are certain kind of facts found in experience, such facts as beauty, splendor, and humor. But like the products of every other intervention into reality, they reveal themselves relative to the interests of the inquirer. But Dewey's "pragmatic instrumentalism" is not just a form of utilitarianism. The error of utilitarianism

was to define value in terms of objects antecedently enjoyed: but for Dewey, just because something has been enjoyed does not make that thing worthy of enjoyment. Without the intervention of thought, enjoyments are not values. To call something valuable is to say that it fulfills certain conditions—namely, that it directs conduct well. There is a difference between the loved and the lovable, the blamed and the blameable, the admired and the admirable. What is needed is an active and cultivated appreciation of value. Its development is a supreme goal, whether the problem confronted is intellectual, aesthetic, or moral.

In fact, the ultimate goal of action should be "the full development of individuals as human beings." Therefore, democracy and education have the same goal. Each individual has something to contribute to the construction of social institutions, and the test of value of all institutions will be the contributions they make back to the individual in terms of creating the conditions for the all-around growth of every member of society. Such growth involves achieving certain kinds of experiences that are final, in that they do not provoke the search for some other experience. These are aesthetic experiences. Sometimes, according to Dewey, these experiences are so intense that they are designated as "religious."

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Shortly before the turn of the century, an amazing phenomenon occurred in Britain, and the ripple effect brought it to America. The British discovered Hegel! This was long after Hegelianism had been declared dead on the continent. Neo-Hegelianism found some able defenders in men like F. H. Bradley at Oxford, J. E. McTaggart at Cambridge, and