Pragmatism and Neopragmatism

It has been claimed that recently there has been a renaissance of pragmatism in the philosophical community. Not only have a multitude of books and articles on pragmatism been published in the past several decades, but notable thinkers across philosophical traditions have embraced or at least endorsed aspects of it, thinkers ranging from Quine, Putnam and Rorty to Habermas, Eco and Apel. Nevertheless, while in one sense this claim of renaissance is true, it is misleading, misleading because pragmatism has been with us continuously since Peirce is said to have coined the term in 1870s. Russell and Dewey engaged in rousing debates on epistemology, logic and truth throughout the first third of the 20th century; Quine championed pragmatism via his brand of naturalism over the past fifty years. Habermas, and Apel have advocated tenets of pragmatism in some form or other since the 1960s. So, while pragmatism as a philosophical tradition, or perhaps school, has been overshadowed throughout much of the 20th century by other traditions and schools (e.g., logical empiricism, ordinary language analysis, phenomenology, structuralism, critical theory), it has not been absent and has not been uninfluential. Furthermore, while pragmatists often focused on epistemological issues such as truth and knowledge, they also - most notably Dewey - addressed concerns of social and political philosophy.

Of course, the term 'pragmatism' as a rubric covers a variety of doctrines and a variety of perspectives with respect to those doctrines, as is evidenced by Peirce's famous - or perhaps infamous - annoyance with William James and others, which eventually led him to abandon the term 'pragmatism' in favor of 'pragmaticism', which he remarked was "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers." Various pragmatic doctrines include: a method of philosophizing, a theory of meaning, and a theory of truth. While these are distinguishable, they are also interconnected.

While not all pragmatists agree on what constitutes the core of pragmatism, there is a cluster of doctrines that characterize it generally. These doctrines are often stated negatively, that is, in terms of what pragmatists reject. For example, pragmatism is identified as being anti-foundationalist, as anti-realist, as rejecting a fact/value dichotomy. Though these labels are not inaccurate, they portray pragmatism as primarily a reaction against other philosophical views or stances. Pragmatist doctrines can be more positively stated, however. So, pragmatism holds to a naturalistic approach to traditional philosophical concerns; it endorses a holistic approach to meaning and truth; it insists on the recognition and importance of no inquiry as disinterested (hence, the rejection of a fact/value dichotomy) and of non-goal-based standards of evaluating inquiry (hence, the rejection of metaphysical realism). As one example: a pragmatist view of truth is frequently identified as (1) opposed to a correspondence view of truth and (2) related to a coherence view of truth, with the added emphasis on future consequences (i.e., what works or what difference it makes). It is not so much false to say this is the gist of a pragmatist view of truth, but it is not very illuminating to identify the pragmatist view of truth this way. Rather, several points need to be made. First, not all pragmatists endorse an identical conception of truth. Peirce was quite critical of what he took James’s view of truth to be. Second, underlying a view of truth is always the question of
why such a theory is a desideratum at all. (What do we want a view of truth for?) Third, how does a pragmatist view of truth differ from alternative views? Where a correspondence view sees truth as a dyadic relation between a sentence or belief on the one hand and facts or states of affairs on the other, and a coherence view sees truth also as a dyadic relation between a sentence or belief on the one hand and a set other sentences or beliefs on the other, a pragmatist view of truth is that it is a triadic relation among (1) a sentence or belief, (2) facts or states of affairs, and (3) a set of other beliefs. For some pragmatists, truth is a quadratic relation including the above three components plus (4) goals or aims. The problem with a straight correspondence view, for pragmatism, is not that it is false, but that, as a theory, it has little (if any) value. For example, one could be a Goodmanian and hold that the reason that the sentence “Grass is grue” is true is because grass is grue just as readily as an English speaker might hold that “Grass is green” is true because grass is green. Likewise, a coherence view of truth fails. Even William James, (in)famous for declaring that truth is a form of expediency, insisted on established, “older” truths as crucial for the status of a given sentence as being true. Quite simply, to pragmatism, the correspondence and coherence views of truth are incomplete; at best they provide necessary conditions. For some pragmatists, then, truth is a triadic relation of sentence + facts + other sentences. For other pragmatists, however, “true” carries a normative component. Rejecting a fact/value dichotomy, pragmatism identifies as involving this fourth aspect of evaluation. The point here is not to fully elaborate a pragmatist conception of truth, but to suggest that pragmatism can and should be characterized not merely in negative terms (e.g., anti-correspondence) but as promulgating positive doctrines.

Among these doctrines are the following: beliefs are instruments with coping with the world; the acceptability of a belief is ultimately a function of the extent to which the belief allows for successful adaptation to the world; all beliefs are fallible; and truth and rationality depend upon utility in coping with future experience. These doctrines, while directly epistemological, apply to ethical and political matters. "Apply" might be a misnomer here, since, for pragmatists, belief, as the product of inquiry, is never disinterested or noninterpretive. That is to say, since inquiry is connected to dismissing or diminishing doubt or surprise, and since we are to understand belief as flowing from our engagement with the world and utility in coping with future experience, there is never disinterested inquiry nor inquiry that does not involve conceptualized interpretation. (It does not follow from this that there are no objective, or at least intersubjective, standards and criteria for inquiry, belief, truth, etc. This is simply to say that all inquiry and belief are not interest-free or nonconceptualized.) So, again, "apply" might be a misnomer above in the sense that axiological elements (both ethical and political) enter into inquiry and are not simply tacked on at the end of inquiry as an application.

As the papers in this issue of Essays in Philosophy demonstrate, pragmatists have found themselves closely related to philosophical thinkers and traditions characterized both as analytic and as continental. Both Quine and Carnap spoke of pragmatic criteria in establishing and settling ontological questions, while both Habermas and Apel both spoke of human situatedness as an ineliminable element in methods and criteria of epistemological assessment. Of course, individual pragmatists have provided numerous seminal works on various philosophical issues, as well. Peirce is acknowledged as having done ground-breaking work in semiotics, James in psychology and philosophy of consciousness, Dewey in naturalistic inquiry and ethics, Mead in the sociality of language and personal identity. The renewed interest and appreciation in not only the classical pragmatists, but also more recent (neo)pragmatists is evidenced in the recognition of their relevance to long-standing as well as recently-emerging philosophical concerns. For example, dissatisfaction with received conceptions of reference has begun to lead philosophers of
language to address this issue through a more pragmatist-oriented lens (e.g., many of the works of Hilary Putnam). Likewise, as a self-labeled pragmatist, Richard Rorty has taken up Dewey’s challenge of putting philosophical analysis to work in the public sphere.

The essays herein provide a representative sample of a pragmatist approach to topics across the philosophical spectrum. The first three essays (by Fahey, Decker, and Butler) specifically relate to axiological issues, the next three (by Clark, Salaverría, and McEvoy) to epistemological concerns, and the final two (by Pihlstrom & El-Hani and Pieterse) to metaphysics. Citing Dewey’s simile that “ideals are like stars; we steer by them, not towards them,” Fahey, argues that, like Aristotle, Dewey speaks of the good with an emphasis on both agent and action, on the idea of the good necessarily in relation to both character and deed. Aims and goals are always situated, with the good as orienting and guiding practical, “choiceworthy” action. This Deweyan naturalistic approach speaks to a unity of virtues as they connect to action via habit, to coherence relative to situatedness.

Where Fahey addresses a connection between pragmatism and traditional moral theory (via Aristotle), Decker argues for the importance of a pragmatist position for the in-the-news topic of human cloning. Adding to a number of contemporary voices on a pragmatist conception of rights, Decker highlights Dewey’s notion of rights as a means to further social and personal ends as well as in terms of situated status. Rights involve persons in natural and social and historical contexts. Understanding rights as fundamentally relations among agents, not as properties of them, is central to his criticism of some recent arguments by Habermas against human cloning. Besides speaking to the nature of rights, Decker’s pragmatist claims also focus on the nature of personhood, again with the emphasis on the relational nature of the self, a theme common throughout the writings of George Herbert Mead. Echoing James’s dictum that a legitimate difference must make a practical difference, Butler states, contrary to the claims of David Luban and others, that the jurisprudential view of legal pragmatism does indeed make a difference both descriptively and prescriptively. Arguing for various procedural and criteriological commitments of legal pragmatism (e.g., contextualism, perspectivism), Butler claims that legal pragmatism, not a “rule of law” model of jurisprudence, is both the practiced norms of our legal system and is also a more fruitful approach to legal adjudication.

D.S. Clark’s essay on a pragmatist instrumental view of moral reasoning bridges pragmatism’s concerns of axiology and epistemology. With respect to “the moral and the prudent,” Clark acknowledges that pragmatism is analogous to forms of practical instrumentalism, while denying that they are identical. Citing Ralph Barton Perry’s work on practical reasoning and deliberative action [work that is being fleshed out today by Gilbert Harman and others] and noting the “working harmony among diverse desires,” Clark addresses a fundamental concern about any naturalistic approach to evaluative concerns, viz., distinguishing and relating the descriptive explanation and prescriptive justification. Clark focuses on three aspects of this concern, (1) prudential practical inferences, (2) moral inferences and shared desires, and (3) the rationalist (i.e., universalizationistic) alternative, and argues for the fecundity of a pragmatist approach over a rationalist one.

Continuing the focus on epistemic concerns and continuing the emphasis by pragmatism on the situated self, Salaverría analyzes the notion of practical deliberation (i.e., common sense) that seems so central to pragmatism. She argues that what has counted as common sense has varied among the pragmatists, but that what has been common to them is the regulatory function of common sense. Drawing especially from the works of recent neopragmatists Richard Rorty and Richard Shusterman, she claims that “common sense” is inherently political and communal. As a regulatory epistemic feature, then, common
sense transcends the individual and is intersubjective. She suggests that the poststructuralist stress on the notion of “discourse” should be replaced by the pragmatist notion of “common sense” because the latter not only recognizes a situated self, but also is a notion that is not primarily linguistic nor primarily imposed from outside. McEvoy, too, insists that, for pragmatism, thought arises from the agent/world interaction and is fallible. His emphasis, however, is specifically on Quine’s version of naturalized epistemology, particularly whether it refutes all accounts of apriorism. McEvoy claims that it does not; he argues that although a pragmatist naturalist epistemology does indeed reject any “first philosophy,” it is not antithetical to apriorism or normative criteria of truth and justification.

Among contemporary adherents of pragmatism, Hilary Putnam is undoubtedly the person most identified with addressing metaphysical issues. Pihlstrom and El-Hani extend pragmatism and Putnam’s criticisms of metaphysical realism to the particular metaphysical issue of emergentism. Drawing not only on Putnam, but also on the works of Dewey and Mead as well as the recent work of Margolis and Stephen, they attempt to provide a pragmatist account of emergents. Beginning with the view that pragmatism holds to a non-reductive naturalism, they argue that the ontology of emergents, like any other ontological issue, is “irreducibly epistemologized.” Along the way, they argue against some critiques of emergents (e.g., those of Jaegwon Kim) and for a version of pragmatic realism. In the final essay, Pieterse asks if there can be a meaningful dialogue between neopragmatism, especially of a Rortyan variety, and the notion of (and desire for) a transcendent God. Such concerns (i.e., a pragmatist understanding of religious matters, including James’s notorious notion of a will to believe and Dewey’s conception of God as the unity of ideal values) have a long-standing tradition among pragmatists. Pieterse argues that such a dialogue is possible (and desirable) by rejecting what he sees as a dichotomy that is set up by Rorty between “transcendence” and “solidarily.” Underlying this dichotomy, for Pieterse, is an emphasis on “the rational self” as the final tribunal of truth claims. Belief in a form of transcendent sacred reality is not inimical to human freedom or flourishing, for Pieterse, because it is not necessarily ahistorical or atemporal.

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