Rethinking Pragmatism

From William James to Contemporary Philosophy

Robert Schwartz

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In honor and memory of Nelson Goodman,
teacher and friend, whose influence on
how I see *philosophy and* think *about art*
has become entrenched.

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Bibliographic Key

Works of William James:

MT	*The Meaning of Truth*, in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978)
P	*Pragmatism*, in *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978)
PP I/II	*The Principles of Psychology*, vols. I and II (New York: Dover, 1950)
SPP	*Some Problems in Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996)
WB	*The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956)

Introduction

We live forwards, a Danish thinker has said, but we understand backwards.

William James endorsed Kierkegaard's idea and cited it often. I too endorse the view and adopt it as an exegetical strategy in rereading the work of the American Pragmatists and in rethinking pragmatism.[1] Obviously, to understand the writings of earlier authors it is necessary to keep in mind the intellectual environment of the time, the proponents cited, the opponents criticized, and the audience intended. But I also believe that an understanding of older works can benefit from reflecting on them in light of subsequent developments in the field. This does not require seeing the author as attempting to deal with the very same problems disputed in today's philosophical journals. Nor is it to suggest that there is profit in substituting a fictive author of the same name who could, would, or should have espoused positions on these issues. The point is that current tools and theories can often be employed to better elucidate the past. They provide a perspective that can help clarify what issues were really at stake, what unnoticed obstacles had to be faced, and why with the tools then available certain questions could not be answered and others not asked. At the same time, studying the history and evolution of issues of current interest can be edifying and liberating. It can help us better understand the nature of problems now being debated as well as provide a context in which to re-examine the assumptions underlying them. I believe a study of the Pragmatists' main theses about inquiry, language, and truth can have just such effects.

Rethinking Pragmatism: From William James to Contemporary Philosophy, First Edition. Robert Schwartz.

I have another reason for re-examining the ideas of these early pragmatic thinkers. Pragmatism has been called the only true American philosophy, and its original proponents Peirce, James, and Dewey were among the best and the brightest. James and Dewey, in particular, were widely known and studied by both professional philosophers and intellectuals within and outside academia. They each taught at prominent universities, and their writings reached large audiences abroad as well as in the United States. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the Pragmatists and their core ideas fell off the analytic philosophy map, although their ideas did retain a committed following outside this mainstream.

In a paper entitled "Whatever Happened to Pragmatism?" I summarized the state of graduate studies in analytic philosophy departments in the mid-twentieth century:

> *To not know Russell, Moore, Schlick and Carnap would have been a scandal. To have run into James only as an aside in an introductory class as the proponent of some bizarre doctrine that if it is useful to believe P, then "P" is true, would not have been unusual. And even today . . . I would be surprised if one out of a hundred new PhD's have read Dewey's Democracy and Education in spite of the fact that the book probably had more influence and impact on our culture and institutions than any philosophical work by an American before or since.*[2]

Now it is not unusual for the ideas of even the most eminent thinkers of one age to disappear from the scholarly scene over time. The Pragmatists, though, were eclipsed rather quickly. Russell, Moore, and other critics were thought to have shown that the Pragmatists' positions were implausible, incoherent, or trivial. Logical positivist projects and programs came to rule the day, and the Pragmatists' writings were mentioned less and less in analytic circles. Nevertheless, even in these circles Pragmatic ideas and theses remained dormant for a relatively short period. By mid-century they resurfaced in influential critiques of logical positivism, albeit with scant attention paid to the Pragmatists' earlier work. James and Dewey, for example, had already provided reasons for rejecting propositions, the "museum of ideas" account of meaning, analyticity, and the given. Often unnoticed too were the actual arguments they gave for rejecting correspondence theories of truth, the quest for certainty, and rules of scientific discovery and confirmation.

With the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, the intellectual landscape shifted and the Pragmatists' work started to attract more attention in analytic circles.[3] Their writings began to be read, talked about, defended, and disputed. Why, though, were their views so readily displaced by logical positivist doctrines that the Pragmatists' arguments seemingly undercut?

Part of the story is that their views were radical and not well understood by critics who took for granted the very assumptions about inquiry, language, and truth the Pragmatists sought to undermine. Two other factors that contributed to their work being ignored are also worth a brief mention. First, the Pragmatists insisted that any account of the nature of scientific inquiry required close examination of the "context of discovery" as well as the "context of justification." The distinction between these contexts was real, but they maintained the latter could not be adequately analyzed when divorced from the former. Projects that attempted to account for norms of inquiry independent of their history would distort both. A second factor was that the Pragmatists' style of writing tended to obscure the real force of their challenges to the doctrines that were displacing them. James and Dewey, the two most widely read Pragmatists, did not write in the technical, formal idiom of analytic philosophy that was being rapidly adopted. In fact, they thought that excessive logical rigor was replacing serious critical analyses of the very ideas their critics were attempting to formalize.

I believe, nonetheless, the Pragmatists' arguments and positions can be better understood when articulated with the help of the logical tools they abjured. So in keeping with the Kierkegaardian strategy announced at the start, I will frequently compare their ideas to that of post-logical positivist thinkers whose work is in the pragmatic spirit. I will look especially at the work of Quine and Goodman who wrote on many of the topics the Pragmatists explored and did so in terms more familiar to today's readers.[4] My hope is that when the Pragmatists' views are put in more modern dress their ideas can be better explained and evaluated. In turn, when so understood I think that many of their positions do not look as peculiar and problematic as they are frequently taken to be.

For many, the Pragmatists' way of dealing with the "classic" problems in philosophy made and continues to make their analyses difficult to accept. The Pragmatists typically did not as much attempt to resolve these "timeless" problems as to dissolve them. They argued that unless the problems were recast pragmatically they either lack empirical sense or substantive

implications. And in wars of words there is no reason taking sides. Naturally those in the grip of a problematic feel shortchanged by this pragmatic response. They maintain that the Pragmatists either missed the real point of deep philosophical questions or that they did try to answer them and failed. For such critics, adopting the Pragmatists' dismissive analyses would, of course, be unsettling. It would be tantamount to admitting that a good deal of the philosophical work that interests them is for naught. It is not easy to adjust to this sort of intellectual Gestalt shift.

I had originally intended to write a book explaining the main themes of the classical American Pragmatists and exploring the implications of their work for contemporary issues in epistemology, language, and metaphysics. Several difficulties soon emerged. Although important defining ideas run through their work, the Pragmatists spelled them out and applied them differently. Peirce, in fact, came to think it best for him to eschew the "pragmatist" label. In a 1905 paper, he famously announced that in order to distinguish his pragmatic position from the others then on offer he was coining "the word 'pragmaticism' which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers."[5] Thus, given the differences among the Pragmatists, weaving their views into a single picture would have required either an unwieldy tome or remaining more on the surface than I wished. For my purposes it seemed best to allow James to be their spokesperson. He was the intellectual pivot of the movement, looking back to Peirce and pointing ahead to Dewey. Moreover, James's particular accounts of belief, religion, truth, inquiry, and pluralism are often taken as the canonical statement of these positions and the form in which they are most criticized. An added benefit is that James is a most engaging writer and a real joy to read.

I soon realized, however, that a book on James's entire body of work itself had drawbacks for my overall project. During his long career James worked in experimental psychology, social psychology, education, epistemology, metaphysics, and religion. Along with many prominent scientists of his day, he also took seriously the study of psychical phenomena.[6] This makes it difficult to find a single thread of argument and development of thought running from one book or paper to another. And like many productive theorists James's views changed over time, and his positions are not always clear and consistent.[7] Fortunately, James suggested a solution to my expository problems. In 1907, near the end of his career, he published *Pragmatism* and says in the Preface that he intends it to be a summary statement of his core pragmatic convictions and positions.

In what follows I will use the chapters of *Pragmatism* as a scaffold for my attempt to rethink pragmatism. My rereading of *Pragmatism* may be thought of also as a commentary on the book. The commentary, however, looks ahead not back. It is an attempt to clarify pragmatic ideas concerning inquiry, language, and truth that resonate with present discussions of these issues. In a number of cases these ideas challenge present orthodoxies, and I am sure those under their sway will find much to criticize. I will not offer rebuttals to such challenges, other than when necessary to explicate the Pragmatists' positions. Although I am sympathetic with the Pragmatists' arguments and proposals, my primary goal in this volume is to explain and explore the implications of pragmatic ideas, not defend or criticize them.

This study, then, does not and is not intended to offer a comprehensive account of James's overall philosophy.[8] When other of his writings are cited it will be primarily to enhance the understanding of theses found in *Pragmatism* rather than to square, compare, or contrast his views there with those he argues for elsewhere. In this I follow the approach Dewey takes in his review of *Pragmatism*, "What Pragmatism Means by 'Practical.'" Near the end of this article Dewey says, "I have attempted to review not so much James's book as the present status of the pragmatic movement which is expressed in the book; and I have selected only those points which seem to bear directly on matters of contemporary controversy."[9]

Pragmatism began as a series of lectures to a variety of audiences, and James says in the Preface, "They are printed as delivered, without developments or notes" [*P*, 5]. His writing tends to lack detail and rigor. James's arguments are not presented systematically, and his positions unfold piecemeal and recycle back on themselves as the lectures proceed. Although he mentions the names of contemporaries (e.g., Royce, Bradley, Spencer, Bergson, and Schiller) who either influenced or opposed his positions, he does little in this book to elaborate their specific arguments and ideas.[10]

For the purposes of rethinking James's pragmatism and exploring its relationships and implications for current issues, I find it more profitable to situate his work with respect to those philosophically oriented scientists (e.g., Ostwald, Poincare, Duhem, Pearson, and Mach) whose views of inquiry he wished to incorporate, accommodate, or challenge. While he mentions their names, once again James does not provide much in the way of the details of their arguments. Nor does he make explicit where he agrees or disagrees with these thinkers' individual analyses.

With some justification, those who know James's work may find my approach narrow. Little attention, for example, will be paid to a major

strand in James's philosophy, his thesis of "radical empiricism." I believe this omission is warranted. James says, and I concur, that "there is no logical connexion between pragmatism [and] . . . 'radical empiricism.' The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist" [*P*, 6].[11] In any case, James does not defend radical empiricism, as such, in *Pragmatism.* Also the thesis is not central to the issues I wish to explore, and hence is less germane to my project.

It is impossible to read *Pragmatism*, or much else of James's writing, without being acutely aware that one of his deepest and constant concerns is to find an account of our place in the natural world that would engage his own spiritual sentiments and needs. The issue of belief in God pervades *Pragmatism*, and I will engage it as it arises. As in the case of radical empiricism, James allows that the positions he adopts here are not entailed by the tenets of pragmatism. The two can be kept apart. It is possible to be a pragmatist and not accept James's views on God, free will, and related matters. The situation is not symmetrical. James's arguments for and the defense of his meaning-of-life positions do depend on the pragmatic theses he brings to the table.[12]

I do not doubt that it is possible to find James saying things in different contexts, before different audiences, and with different purposes that may not comport with my reading. Given my goal to rethink the trajectory of the pragmatist movement, I lean toward adopting interpretations that are close to Dewey's expositions of James's ideas, as I think they are the most interesting from the standpoint of current philosophical interests. I believe, too, that my account fits well both with James's essays in *The Meaning of Truth* that were written in response to criticisms of *Pragmatism*, and with his posthumously published introductory text, *Some Problems in Philosophy*.

One final word of caution. The Pragmatists, especially James, said many things that on first and perhaps second reading seem puzzling if not implausible. The Pragmatists often responded to such criticism by claiming that their positions were being misunderstood and mischaracterized. I do not intend here to spend time apportioning blame between the Pragmatists and their critics. There is surely enough to go around. What I find more significant is that, when challenged, the Pragmatists did explain their ideas in ways that should have clarified and removed much of the ambiguity. But even when they were so presented, their opponents continued to reject their pragmatic theses.