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#### PRAGMATISM AS A PHILOSOPHIC METHOD.

THE recent redefinition of pragmatism by Professor James and C. S. Peirce in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, and its application afresh in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, raises again the question as to the extent to which it can really be regarded as a distinctive philosophic method. We propose to note briefly how pragmatism is defined by its two chief exponents, attempting to get as clearly as possible its face value and its implications. We shall then be in a position to decide whether, taking it as it stands, it admits of thoroughgoing application; and, if not, in what respect it demands modification, or in what respect its possible ambiguities can be cleared up by a more careful psychological interpretation of its presuppositions.

The pragmatic standpoint is without doubt an attractive one. It seems to offer a criterion of truth that is both easy of application and certain in its results. It appeals to the practical mind, impatient with the subtleties of metaphysics, as the only real basis for philosophy. Under the heading "Pragmatism" in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, C. S. Peirce says: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." Professor James maintains that pragmatism is "the doctrine that the whole 'meaning' of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences," either conduct to be recommended or experiences to be expected, if the conception is true, which would be different if it were untrue.

James also says: "In methodology it is certain that to trace and compare their respective consequences is an admirable way of establishing the differing meanings of different conceptions." Peirce maintains that as James works out and applies the doctrine in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, it seems to assume that the end of man is action, a thesis that Peirce himself does not

find as credible at sixty as at thirty. He refers to pragmatism as a "practical maxim"; and it seems that he really intends it as such, rather than as a thoroughgoing philosophic method.

As to the *kind* of effects that the pragmatist has in view when he insists on the test of practical consequences, Peirce says: "The only ultimate good which the practical facts to which it [the pragmatic procedure] directs attention can subserve is to further the development of concrete reasonableness; so that the meaning of the concept does not lie in any individual reactions at all, but in the manner in which those reactions contribute to that development." "The ultimate good lies in the evolutionary process in some way."

In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture XVIII, James discusses the principle in some detail with reference to its use in the philosophy of religion. This book as a whole furnishes an excellent example of the application of the method, and in it we should look to find many doubtful points cleared up, not because the method itself is here any more explicitly stated than elsewhere, but because in the wealth of concrete detail which it presents, we may judge its meaning better than through the more abstract statement. We must here confine ourselves to the generalizations that the book offers us. The following is condensed from pages 442 ff. Continental philosophy has too often overlooked the fact of the organic connection of thinking and conduct. British philosophy has, on the other hand, been guided by the principle that every difference must *make* a difference, and that the best method of discussing points of theory is to begin by ascertaining what practical differences would result if one alternative or the other were true. What is the cash value of a particular truth in terms of particular experience? This is illustrated in the attitudes of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. The problems of philosophy presented themselves in some such form as this: What is the cash value of personal identity, of matter, of cause, etc.? Peirce's position is summarized thus: "Thought in movement has for its only conceivable motive the attainment of belief, or thought at rest. Only when our thought about an object has found its rest in belief can our action on the subject

firmly and safely begin. Beliefs, in short, are rules for action; and the whole function of thought is but one step in the production of active habits. If there were any part of thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no element of the thought's significance."

Professor James next applies the principle to the question of which attributes of God are really any more than merely verbal ones, with the result that such attributes as aseity, necessity, simplicity, etc., are condemned as meaningless, because there is no assignable way in which we can modify our action in order to adapt ourselves the better to these characteristics. Likewise God's simplicity does not tend to produce in us any specific acts. On the other hand, the moral attributes, such as holiness, omniscience, justice, etc., clearly determine in us fear and hope and expectation, and are the foundation in us of a particular sort of life. These pragmatically justifiable characteristics, especially that of punitive justice, are incapable of logical proof. No scholastic argument regarding them has ever been satisfactory to other than a few philosophers, and no one has ever changed his life as a result of such arguments.

In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, still further implications of pragmatism are worked out. As we have already seen, the most characteristic doctrine of the method before us is that the meaning of an idea, or concept, comes out only as it modifies activity or conduct. The question arises as to the relation of this principle to the doctrine that the desire for a certain kind of truth brings about that special truth's existence. It seems to be a psychological fact that the holding in mind of certain kinds of beliefs tends to produce results of such a nature that the belief may be said to have become valid, or to have objectified itself. On the surface, this seems to conflict with the pragmatic principle. Pragmatism says: If a concept or notion refers to a real difference in things, it must be possible to point out that it has some effect in concrete life. Psychology, on the other hand, says: Let a concept of *any* kind be present in consciousness and it will result in some modification of action. This theory of the relation of consciousness to movement, James

generalizes into an account of the way in which the world of fact is built up. Faith in a fact helps create the fact. Contesting beliefs are really half formed facts struggling for existence. At least, such seems to be the doctrine of *The Will to Believe*. The success of these struggling beliefs is, of course, dependent on the sort of practical effects that they are able to bring forth. But every belief, by hypothesis, tends to realize itself. There seems to be nothing inherent in the idea itself that determines whether its effects will be of one kind or another. We can only say of it that, if it remains a vital mental content, it will have some sort of overt consequences. All such contents apparently stand on the same level in so far as they are merely beliefs, or opinions.

It would seem from this that the real world might be considered a resultant of the various beliefs that men have held, and yet not merely a resultant, inasmuch as some agency over and above the contending mental attitudes had to determine which effects were most fit. In other words, just as Nature is conceived as a selective agency reacting upon the infinite variations of animal and vegetable life, so there is an objectified system of beliefs, the result of previous selection and survival, and in this every new idea must be able to vindicate its worth if it is to endure. In fine, James seems to hold that our world of fact is in some measure conditioned by previous beliefs, and the order that has once got established reacts back on the ideas that have not as yet emerged into full fact. The test of the reality of an idea is its power to influence conduct, and the way in which any sort of conduct comes into existence is through the instrumentality of the idea or belief that it should be so. The ambiguity here might also be stated thus: Our conscious attitudes are naturally organized with reference to action; hence they are meaningless unless they in some way produce, or modify activity. But the very presence of an idea in the human consciousness is *ipso facto* evidence that there will be some difference in the way of overt consequences, so that it would seem that all mental activity has some meaning, if meaning is to be determined by external effects. But this inherent tendency of ideas to get objective expression is never fully realized in practice, because the

previously objectified system of ideas reacts on the vanguard of new beliefs as it emerges into being. It is thus not the essential worth of the idea, but its ability to produce change in the objective order, that establishes its truth; and this capacity to produce change seems to be conditioned entirely by what is already objectively real.

It is impossible, without giving pragmatism a broader statement than either James or Peirce have bestowed upon it, to see the exact relation of these two lines of thought—the one that every concept to be true must make a difference in conduct, and the other that every concept or belief, if it is a part of one's mental equipment, *does* make a difference. The connecting link between them, as James has left the matter, seems to be that, while every mental content is potentially connected with overt activity, it does not necessarily possess validity unless it can in some measure fit into the existing organization of objectified beliefs. Every concept does *tend* to make a difference; but all do not succeed in doing so, simply because the real world happens to be what it is. It is no doubt true that the original statement of pragmatism has been modified in this fashion to render it more available as a philosophic method.

It is accordingly clear that it is not mere working, but working of a certain kind, that is required to establish the validity of any theory or concept. James emphasizes this necessity in various ways. For instance, a true philosophy must be more than a logical one. It must also be able to awaken active impulses or satisfy æsthetic demands.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, various *kinds* of active impulses, and therefore we have to look still further for a standard; that is, a thing is not rational *merely* because it makes a difference in conduct. James finds this further criterion in the familiarity of the action that is aroused by the thought; that which suggests customary movements in which we can easily pass from one thing to another, we regard as rational. The suggested activity must further be congruous with our spontaneous powers, must not baffle or contradict our active propensities.

<sup>1</sup> *The Will to Believe*, p. 76.

It is somewhat difficult to determine whether the pragmatist would hold that some ideas are essentially irrational, or whether some are merely remotely connected with practical needs, though ultimately arising out of them. In the essay entitled "The Sentiment of Rationality," p. 85, James says: "Later mental development . . . gives birth to a vast amount of theoretic activity over and above that which is immediately ministerial to practice, yet the earlier claim is only postponed, not effaced, and the active nature asserts its rights to the end." According to this, much vague theoretical matter can be justified on even pragmatic grounds. We may ask the pragmatist, however, if there is, over and above these ideas, another class of speculations that have absolutely no claim upon rationality because they have not even remote bearings on conduct. If such a class exists, it would at any rate be difficult to distinguish it from the class which has remote practical bearings. It is possible that pragmatism in its original form would condemn all systems of thought that have no immediate practical consequences, even though these systems had their origin in concrete problems.

However this may be, we probably get here James's concept of a rational philosophy as over against a merely logical one. We have in the assumption that thought may be logical and yet not reasonable, a radical difference from dialectical philosophy. The point of interest now, however, is as to what sort of conduct it is that we have in mind when we say a thing is practical, or that it 'works.' We may assume that James would characterize it in a manner similar to his description of thought that is rational as over against the merely logical. That is, it is conduct that is familiar, customary, or congruous with the other elements of our world. The rest of the world of activity, by the very fact of its existence, is valid. Hence congruity of the new with the old is the test of the rationality of the new. But it must not only be congruent with the existing world of conduct, it must also be in accord with the spontaneous tendency of the individual to activity. The rationality of an act, then, depends on its harmony with the individual and with the world, in the same way that a thought comes to be true, first, by the faith of some individual, and secondly, by its own practical efficiency.

In summary, we may say of pragmatism that it is, as first proposed by Peirce, primarily a *practical maxim*, to the effect that the consequences in action or conduct of any concept or idea are really all there can be to the *meaning* of the concept. It is not, however, mere consequences that concern the pragmatist. There is a 'concrete reasonableness' over and above all concepts, an objective system of which they are to become a part if they refer to real differences in the ultimate constitution of things. The emphasis of both James and Peirce is essentially on the practical. The theoretical is constantly to submit to the test of the concrete. There can be no doubt but that it is this that makes pragmatism an attractive doctrine. The man who is impatient with metaphysics feels that here at last he can escape the vagaries of theoretical speculation by referring everything to concrete experience. By adhering rigidly to the test of overt consequences, James holds that the pragmatic method is not concerned with any questions of origin. That is, the practical bearings of a fact are what they are, and it is getting at them in a very roundabout fashion, he seems to think, to investigate them through the genesis of the fact itself. At least this is the position taken in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The origin may throw light on present workings, or it may not; in any case, it is necessary to recur to the present to substantiate the assumptions based upon the nature of the origin. He thus explicitly excludes from his evaluation of a religious experience any implication that may be suggested by the nature of its origin. The practical workings of any religious attitude, such as the state of trance, mysticism, Christian Science, etc., are all to be judged pragmatically by their current effects upon conduct, and without any reference to possible pathological or neurotic causes behind them. Perhaps this does not add anything to our previous exposition, aside from emphasizing the fact that with pragmatism the standard is *always* the concrete present, in which the opprobrium of the past must show itself, if it is worth being considered at all. It does not, of course, deny that there may be such stigmata; but, if they do exist, they must show themselves in present effects. Condemnation merely because of past record is invalid if the present is satisfactory.

We shall attempt to show presently that it is these very considerations of genesis that pragmatism needs to take into account to render itself truly useful. An inquiry into the origin of a fact is by no means an attempt to prejudice its present value. It is rather undertaken in order that we may understand the present value more adequately. If genetic inquiries mean anything, they mean that through them we can the more accurately locate the "exact and objective conditions under which a given fact appears."<sup>1</sup> It is the weak point of pragmatism that it does not recognize that no effects can be evaluated out of relation to the conditions with reference to which they have occurred.

We may turn now, after this descriptive statement, and take a critical view of the subject. The fundamental ambiguity in pragmatism seems to be due to the manner in which it conceives thought as in some way external to both the world of action and the world of things. This objection at first seems paradoxical. It is true that thought may modify action, but it is not through any functional relation that it bears to it, but simply because it happens to represent some ontological difference. This externality of thought to activity is in a measure overcome by the doctrine that *all* thought *tends* to pass over into overt reality. But this does not really solve the difficulty; for, as thus conceived, a given thought makes a difference in action not because of its possible connection with the ultimate constitution of things, as we had been led to suppose from the original pragmatic doctrine, but through the world of concrete reality in which it occurs. It is, therefore, the objective order that simply selects certain of the thoughts that are conceived as projected into it, and rejects others. There is here no organic connection between thought and action. Thought just happens to be; and, owing to a purely external relation to reality, it is true or false.

The strong point of pragmatism is, however, that it *does* assert a connection between thought and action. Its greatest weakness is, that it does not give an adequate account of just what this relationship is. Thought seems, on the one hand, to be more or less a copy of the reality to which our conduct must conform,

<sup>1</sup>Dewey, *Psychology and Philosophical Method*.

and, in so far as it is a true copy, it does affect conduct. But, on the other hand, it seems that the world of action is the only reality in which thoughts of otherwise apparently equal validity must prove their worth.

If the pragmatist would conceive of thought as arising out of definite sorts of crises within activity, and as having a determinable function to perform with reference to further action, he would find that his ambiguities would largely disappear. Thought is organic with action in its origin as well as in its effects. The real question to raise regarding it is not whether it has effects or not, or whether it makes a difference in practice, but *what* effects it has, and to what sort of a concrete situation it owes its origin. Ideas are merely phases or stages within a single process. Their value does not depend upon their corresponding to supposed real differences in the constitution of things, but rather upon their efficiency in solving the difficulties in the experience that produced them. Every concept or notion is to be interpreted with reference to a certain kind of experience. By such a view of thought the pragmatist will in no wise lose a whit of what he has insisted upon from the start. He may still hold that thought is connected with action; but instead of holding to a connection of a more or less external kind, he can go further and insist that thought is a part of action, that it *is* action with the emphasis on the process of effecting new adjustments. In fact, it has no meaning except with reference to tensions within experience, on the one hand, and adjustments on the other. Pragmatism has neglected to take account of the former, and has thus been obliged to force an artificial treatment of the latter.

With such a reinterpretation of the fundamental pragmatic doctrine, *i. e.*, the connection of thought with action, the consequences or effects of thought can be dealt with more intelligibly. If thought is taken as having only an external relation to action, it becomes necessary to postulate over against it some sort of a coherent order of which thought is either a copy, or which selects what happens to be in accord with itself. But if thought is interpreted with reference to action on the side of origin as well as on that of consequences, the problem regarding it shifts

from that of its relation to an external order of things, to an inquiry into the sort of needs that produced it, and the degree to which it is effective in bringing about the required readjustments. We are not concerned to find whether our mental contents do or do not correspond with an external order, but to discover the exact nature of the relation that we take it for granted does exist.

Pragmatism, by neglecting to analyze completely the relation of mental activity to the larger whole of experience, really loses all the advantage it claims to have over the traditional philosophical modes of procedure. It falls into the very difficulty of which it accuses the latter. It involves itself in the necessity of defining a coherent order of things in and of itself, precisely the pitfall of the philosophical vagaries that it intended so astutely to avoid. To hold that the idea which has arisen out of a vital difference in the constitution of things may be distinguished by its effects, is to assume a knowledge of a coherent order of objective reality; for, without such a knowledge, how could the proper effects be known as such? It is certainly as necessary for us to be able to distinguish between good and bad effects as it is to distinguish between efficiency and non-efficiency. We want to be able to say what kind of a difference in action is desirable and what kind is not. Such a problem is surely a pertinent one; but pragmatism, by failing to analyze fully this relation of thought to action in its solution of the problem, gives up its distinctive position as a philosophical method. That is, it postulates a coherent order of things in which ideas, acts, and feelings have values according to their efficiency in promoting this coherency, or in fitting into it. It presupposes a reality that is already rationalized, and its test for new matter is: Does it promote the rational process in which it claims to exist? There would be less ambiguity if it held to the bald assertion that "every difference must make a difference"; but such a philosophical method, however logical and easy of application, would be, to say the least, a very inadequate one. It is not strange, then, that pragmatism seeks to define differences, and in the way pointed out above. In so doing, it is logically involved in all the complications of previous

philosophy; for the rational order itself cannot be used without definition, and to define it surely requires a whole system of speculative thought. Even if it were to supplement its theory of the relation of thought to action by a theory of a rational order that could be clearly defined, it seems still that its problem would be full of difficulty; for it could never be sure that even apparently the most barren ideas might not eventually have some influence upon conduct. Even the pragmatist admits that there is a vast amount of theoretic activity that is not "immediately ministerial to practice," but which is ultimately so. How, then, shall we draw the line between that which is remotely connected with conduct and that which is merely verbal? Does not the assumption of the organic relation of thought and action preclude the possibility of the absolutely meaningless? Pragmatism is here, as we have said, involved in a difficulty that the traditional philosophy escapes. The latter assumes from the start that everything will in some fashion conform with the system that it presupposes. Hence it has nothing to do but to describe its system.

Pragmatism is, however, under the necessity of deciding which mental contents will, and which will not influence conduct, and which influence it in the right way, and which in the wrong way. We hold that it is absolutely impossible for pragmatism, without a further definition of its terms, to throw the slightest light upon either problem. If it proposes to distinguish different kinds of effects, it is evident that it must be able to determine what sort of an objective system is most desirable to have perpetuated; or, in other words, it must use as its criterion the function of the facts under consideration, their function in relation, not to an established order of existence within reality as a whole, but to clearly defined situations. By defining mental contents through their place in a process of reconstruction of experience, by making the question regarding reality one as to the functions of its elements rather than as to its structure, pragmatism would be susceptible of a far more satisfactory application; and it would, moreover, sustain its claim to be a real philosophic method. Its problem would then be not as to whether an idea has or has not effects, but rather as



to what its function is within the sort of experience in which it arose. This, of course, involves an analysis of experience, and of the possibility of its being modified in certain definite ways.

It is from a failure to analyze adequately the psychological postulate, that consciousness leads to some sort of movement, that pragmatism is involved in the apparent ambiguity of holding, on the one hand, that every true difference in thought must make a difference in action, and, on the other hand, that every mental content does tend to make a difference. We have an essentially inadequate view of thought if we regard it as related to action only on the side of effects. The larger view is that it bears a functional relation to experience both preceding and following; and hence that it necessarily has some sort of effects, but only such as can be estimated by taking into account the entire situation both before and after. The two sides of pragmatism may thus be brought into organic relation. We may judge of effects in terms of experience, recognizing that, while all thought serves a definite function, differences are verbal or apparent only in case the actual function is the same.

We can apply this larger conception to James's criticism of certain of the traditional attributes of the deity. If he fails to find any way in which aseity, necessariness, or simplicity modify action, it must be because he has sought for the wrong kind of effects. The problem is not whether these are really God's attributes or not, but rather what attitude toward him led the Schoolmen to postulate these attributes. They were certainly produced by some sort of a situation that either directly or indirectly had practical connections. If this is true, they can be explained only as we find out what that situation was. They become verbal and meaningless when they are abstracted from their true setting and set up as valid in themselves. The reason, on the other hand, that no scholastic argument can offer satisfactory proof of the so-called real attributes of the deity, is that such an argument, also, attempts to prove them out of the connection in which they have meaning. They are convincing to the ordinary man because he takes them where they belong, *i. e.*, with relation to certain aspects, or problems of his practical experience. They may be

said to be functionally related to particular crises, or tensions within his everyday life. If the philosopher would demonstrate them in this way, he might stand some chance of convincing others than himself of their truth.

All philosophy would probably admit that concrete practice is the ultimate ground out of which our problems arise, and that it is for the clarification of these problematic situations that we put forth our theoretical efforts. The difference between the pragmatic philosophy and the other types of thought should be found in the way in which it seeks to solve this common problem. If pragmatism attempts to do this by introducing a concept of concrete reasonableness, it involves itself logically in the most theoretical speculations. All science and philosophy, though differing in all other particulars, agree in the endeavor to present a coherent statement for the world of their experience. They may feel it necessary, in order to accomplish this, to postulate a world beyond experience; but in any case the aim is to get an ultimate and consistent view that will serve as a setting for, and will give validity to, concrete experience. In so far the purpose of pragmatism reduces to something not materially different from that of the more speculative philosophies, namely, to the evaluation of every detail or fact that can possibly present itself by a scheme of previously constructed rationality. It may be urged that, even if pragmatism rests with this programme, there is nothing ambiguous about it; that being essentially practical, it escapes these theoretical difficulties into which other philosophy has fallen. It concerns itself with the obvious fact that some ideas have good effects while others do not, and that some have apparently no effects at all. The only reply that should be necessary to this plea is, that if pragmatism begins to define what it means by kinds of effects, it is driven into the theoretic statement with all its difficulties, or it must admit the thoroughgoing functional relationship of thought and action. In other words, the test of feasibility is not something that can be applied off-hand. It is legitimate only when it is preceded by a genetic and sociological statement of the conditions within which the term to be evaluated appears.

Thought is an organic part of experience as a whole, consid-



ered as an active process ; and hence, the question as to *mere* effects is, to say the least, unnecessary. The real point of interest is the relation of the consequences of any thought to the larger whole of experience, the sort of situations that produced the thoughts and the function of the latter in the onward movement of the process. There is really no ultimate statement to which the particular can be squared, aside from its function in the development of experience. The single act is not interesting as a mere act or as a part of a static system, but only as accomplishing something that is related to other acts.

We will not deny to pragmatism its right to define what is real and vital, and what is false ; we simply maintain that it must make a preliminary investigation of what it is that we can rightfully assume as real, or what is subject to any statement that we can legitimately try to make. For one thing, we cannot state *our* experience in terms of any more ultimate reality. If it cannot itself be made consistent, there is no consistency for us anywhere. The problem of philosophy is to explain the particular by locating it in its context. There is no such thing as a merely verbal concept, nor a meaningless or erroneous idea. Whatever exists has meaning and validity, if not in one context in another ; and the task for philosophy is not one of selecting and rejecting, but of finding the setting of that which is.

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