

PRAGMATISM

This term was introduced into philosophy in 1898 by William James in an address to the California Union in which James made reference to the doctrine expounded by Peirce in an essay of 1878 entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear". Some year later, Peirce declared that he had invented the name *pragmatism* for the theory that a *conception*, that is the rational meaning of a word, of another expression, consists exclusively in its conceivable impact on the conduct of life; and that he had preferred this term to *practicism* or *practicalism*, because these last, for one who knows the sense which the Kantian philosophy attributes to "practical", refer to the moral world where experiment has no place, while the doctrine he proposed is precisely an experimentalistic doctrine. Nevertheless in the same article, he declared that, in view of the extension of meaning which pragmatism had received at the hands of William James and of F. C. S. Schiller, he preferred the term *pragmaticism*, to indicate his own, strictly methodological, conception of pragmatism ("What Pragmatism Is", the *Monist*, 1905; *Collected Papers*, 5, 411-437). Peirce himself came, in this way, to distinguish two fundamental versions of pragmatism which may be characterized as follows: 1. a methodological pragmatism, which is fundamentally a theory of meaning; 2. a metaphysical pragmatism which is a theory of truth and reality.

1. *Methodological* pragmatism does not undertake to define truth or reality, but only a procedure for determining the meaning of term or, better, of propositions. Peirce says in the article of 1878, which is ordinarily taken to be the birth date of pragmatism: "It is impossible to have in mind an idea which refers to anything other than the sensible effects of things. So that the rule for reaching the ultimate degree of clarity in the apprehension of ideas is the following: "To consider which are the effects, that might conceivably have practical consequences, which we think that the object of our conception might have. The conception of these effects is our entire conception of that object" (*Chance, Love and Logic*, I, 2,1). The principle for which this methodological rule derives is that "the function of thought is to produce habits of action" that is *beliefs*. The rule proposed by Peirce was, therefore, suggested by the need of finding a scientific or experimental procedure for fixing beliefs; understanding by scientific or experimental procedure one which does not have recourse to the method of authority of the *a priori* method (*Ibid.*, I,1,2, pg.9 ff.). Dewey's pragmatism may be said to belong to the same type, although, in order to avoid any equivocation, he prefers the term "*instrumentalism*" (q.v.). "The essence of pragmatic instrumentalism" he wrote, "is to conceive of both knowledge and practice as means of making goods – excellencies, in existence of all kinds – secure in experienced existence" (*The Quest for Certainty*, 1929, p.37). From this point

of view, Dewey shared the experimentalism of Peirce, because he held that “experimentation enters into the determination of every warranted proposition” (*Logic*, 1939, p.461); and he placed in clear relief the instrumental or operative character of all the procedures of knowledge, considered as means of passing from an indeterminate situation to a determined situation, that is, one which is, at the same time, distinct and unified (*Logic*, Ch., VI). Therefore the very close lines of relation between this type of pragmatism, on the one hand, contemporary scientific methodology and in particular, *operationism* (q.v.) and on the other hand the fundamental principles of symbolic logic are sufficiently obvious. The Italian pragmatists Giovanni Vailati and Mario Calderoni placed particular emphasis on this latter relation, i.e. with symbolic logic. The first observed, in this regard, that the fundamental point of contact between logic and pragmatism “lies in their common tendency to consider the value, and the very meaning of an assertion as something intimate related to the employment that it is possible or that one wishes to make of it for the deduction or the construction of determined consequences or groups of consequences (“Pragmatism and mathematical logic”, 1906, in *Il metodo della filosofia*, pg. 198). These words describe very well the functional character of pragmatism of methodological inspiration.

2. The conception of metaphysical pragmatism is that of William James and F.C. Schiller and its fundamental theses consist in reducing truth to utility and reality to spirit or mind. The second of these theses is shared by pragmatism with a great part of contemporary philosophy; and James himself recognized and boasted of the substantial agreement between his philosophy and that of the French spiritualists, Bergson in particular. The first thesis is characteristic of this form of pragmatism. Its presupposition is the principle which it has in common with methodological pragmatism: the instrumentality of knowledge. But this presupposition is understood and carried out by it in an entirely different form. In the first place, it tries to place in full relief the dependence of all aspects of knowledge (or of thought) on the demands of action and therefore on the emotions in which these needs take concrete form. Even “rationality”, according to James, is a kind of sentiment (“the sentiment of rationality” in *The Will to Believe*, 1897). From this point of view, human actions and desires condition truth: every kind of truth, including the scientific. Therefore, it is not legitimate from this point of view, to refuse to believe in doctrines that promise to exercise a beneficial effect on the life of man, on the grounds that these doctrines are not supported by adequate rational proofs. In cases such as these, James held, it is necessary to run the risk of believing. F. C. Schiller carried this doctrine to its extreme consequences, exhuming Pythagoras’ saying “man is the measure of all things” and affirming the relativity of knowledge with regard to

personal and social utility (*Humanism*, 1903). While Schiller stopped at this relativism, James, by means of it, open the way to theism and to traditional spiritualistic doctrines, on the ground that they are useful for action and beneficial for human life. And although he tried to limit the dogmatism of these doctrines, by insisting on the pluralistic character of the universe (v. Pluralism) and on the finite character of divinity (v. God) pragmatism was, for him, essentially a way of access to traditional metaphysics. One of the motives which James adduced for justifying the exercises of the will to believe is that belief can produce its own justification this sometimes happens in human relations when the belief that someone is friendly to us, leads us to conduct ourselves in a friendly manner to him and thus procures his friendship. It is difficult to make theological or metaphysical use of this proposition; it has, nevertheless, become a rather important theorem in contemporary sociology. For the rest, while methodological pragmatism has found its continuation in studies in logic and methodology and in certain currents of neo-empiricism, epistemological pragmatism has merged with spiritualistic currents. (Compare H.W. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy*, 2a, ed. 1957).

The other manifestations which pragmatism has had outside the Anglo-Saxon world are related to this metaphysical pragmatism. In the first place, there is related to it the philosophy of Hans Vaihinger, expounded in the work *Philosophie des Als Ob*, 1911 (*The Philosophy of As If*), in which he asserted the factitious character of all knowledge and the biological character of the preference accorded to one form of knowledge over another. The pluralism of A. Aliotta (*La guerra eterna e il dramma dell'esistenza – The Eternal War and the Drama of Existence*, 1917) which exhibits the same spiritualistic accents as does the pragmatism of James (cf. Aliotta, *Il sacrificio come significato del mondo – Sacrifice as the Meaning of the World*, 1947). Finally the pragmatic fideism of Miguel de Unamuno, as it is presented in his *Commentary on Don Quixote* (1905) and his *Tragic Sentiment of Life* (1913), and the philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset (*The Modern Theme*, 1923; *Concerning Galileo*, 1933; *History as System*, 1923, etc.) are related to this metaphysical pragmatism, though the last-named, especially in his last writings, shows evidence of the influence of the existentialism of Heidegger.

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