

Opinion Page.

Think like a pragmatist: Resist dogma and accept uncertainty

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In the everyday sense of the term, the pragmatist is the person who ‘gets results’. The term can be intended as either a compliment or a criticism; it can be applied equally to effective and to unscrupulous managers and politicians. These connotations carry over, typically in misleading ways, into the philosophical sense of pragmatism.

Pragmatism is the United States’ most important contribution to philosophy, emerging in the late 19th century, developing throughout the 20th, and flourishing today. At its heart is a rejection of what one of its founders, [John Dewey](#) (1859-1952), calls ‘the spectator theory of knowledge’. This theory, which can be traced to Plato, holds that reality is composed of two discrete entities: the world of objects, which exist independently of us, and the minds, which perceive and seek accurately to represent that world. In the alternative account offered by pragmatists, the mind is, rather, a part of the world, in which it plays an active role. Pragmatists, accordingly, describe us not as seeking to represent reality as it exists independently of us, but rather as developing more effective and imaginative ways of coping with the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Pragmatists take up some of the questions that have been central to the Western philosophical tradition: what is truth? What is objectivity? How might these be discovered or achieved? How should our political and social lives be structured? They find answers not in some

supposedly transcendental realm, but as growing out of and remaining firmly rooted in our concrete dealings with the world. In the words of another of its founders, [William James](#) (1842-1910): ‘The trail of the human serpent is ... over everything.’

Pragmatism offers answers to many of the questions that have interested philosophers since Plato. There is, though, no single programme or set of tenets around which every pragmatist unites, and the tradition contains very different and sometimes conflicting ideas. In what follows, I set out some ideas that I think are particularly useful.

Exorcise the spirit of Cartesianism

The American philosopher [Charles Sanders Peirce](#) (1839-1914) founded pragmatism in reaction to what he called ‘the spirit of Cartesianism’, a spirit that he saw as haunting philosophy since the 17th century. What is this spirit? The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) inaugurated modern philosophy by redescribing the Platonic view of knowledge by locating representations within the mind and asking whether we can know that they represent the outer world.

From this starting point, he asked us to call into doubt all of our beliefs about the external world (and even beliefs about our own selves) in order to establish an unimpeachable foundation upon which to build our knowledge. If we could find something that *cannot* be doubted, we would know that it is true. And Descartes thought he alighted upon an indubitable certainty when he proclaimed ‘*Cogito, ergo sum*’ – I think, therefore I am. By virtue of thinking, you cannot doubt that you *are*.

Peirce argues, in the [essay](#) ‘Some Consequences of the Four Incapacities’ (1868), that what he calls the ‘Cartesian maxim’ is wholly artificial, arising only as the consequence of Descartes’s unhelpful description of the mind and its relation to the world. ‘We cannot,’ he tells us, ‘begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy.’ The importance of this remark for pragmatism can be appreciated by taking note of Peirce’s choice of the words ‘cannot’ and ‘must’. We ‘cannot’ begin by doubting all our prejudices – a pejorative word for our beliefs – and ‘must’ begin there because they constitute our selves.

Peirce rejects the idea of a self as an entity that exists before its encounters with the world, and which might separate itself from its beliefs about that world. This point has been taken up by one of the most influential pragmatists of recent years, [Richard Rorty](#) (1931-2007). Rorty describes the self as being composed of its mental states, its beliefs, desires, moods, and so on. But, as he emphasises in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1990): ‘The important thing is to think of the collection of those things as *being* the self rather than as something which the self *has*.’ You cannot then step aside from your beliefs in order to call them into question, for the reason that there is no self to the side of its beliefs that might conduct such questioning.

But while we must, as Peirce argues, begin with all the beliefs that constitute ourselves, we do not end there. A necessary condition for something’s being a belief is that one would be prepared to act on it. As we move through the world, we run into circumstances that call into question, and make us doubt, some of our beliefs. This is not, however, the kind of radical doubt that Descartes describes and that Peirce dismisses. ‘A person may,’ Peirce writes, ‘find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a

positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim.’ He concludes with the sensible and pragmatic suggestion that we should ‘not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts’.

Play the game of giving and asking for reasons

Pragmatism takes our attempts to cope with the world to be continuous with those of the nonhuman animals. At the same time, pragmatists such as Robert B Brandom view human activity as being importantly distinct. Brandom argues that what distinguishes us from creatures who merely respond to the world is that we, uniquely, make judgments for which we are *responsible*.

There are two parts to Brandom’s explanation of the idea of responsibility. The first is that, when one makes a judgment, one expresses commitments. For illustration, in *Reason in Philosophy* (2009), Brandom considers the concept ‘red’. To grasp that concept, one must be able to place it in a web of *inferential* relations, so that when ‘red’ is put into a sentence – *The light is red* – one becomes committed to the further sentence – *I should stop the car*. In contrast, a parrot can be trained to squawk ‘That’s red’ when it sees red objects but does not know that doing so precludes it from uttering ‘That’s green’. You and I do.

The second part of Brandom’s account is to argue that responsibility is a *social* status. Once we make a statement – *That light is red* – we immediately become subject to appraisals by other people about the propriety of what we say and do; if I don’t stop, I am responsible to other motorists, pedestrians and the police. We, unlike other animals, participate in what Brandom calls ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’. In that game, we hold each other responsible for the commitments we make by asking for the reasons for them, and whether we are entitled to what we consequently say and do. ‘If you promise to drive me to the airport at three tomorrow,’ Brandom writes of an experience that probably resonates with quite a few of us, ‘it is not up to you what would count as fulfilling that promise.’

One issue that the pragmatist account of responsibility must address is to explain how we are at once the creators of the various games we play and constrained by them. To explain, Brandom and the American literary theorist and legal scholar Stanley Fish have both drawn on the English and US tradition of the common law. The content of the common law is determined exclusively by the decisions taken by previous judges. There is no original definition to which judges commit themselves in order to reach a decision, and no principle to follow that defines the circumstances in which they should be applied. And yet, a judge is not free to decide a case in any way she chooses, for she is responsible to the history of case law that she inherits. In *Doing What Comes Naturally* (1989), Fish usefully captures the difference in this way:

A judge who decided a case on the basis of whether or not the defendant had red hair would not be striking out in a new direction; he would simply not be acting as a judge, because he could give no reasons for his decision that would be seen as reasons by competent members of the legal community.

In reaching their decision in a case, a judge must select the prior cases that are relevant, making judgments about similarities and differences in order to reach their decision in the case they are judging.

Pragmatists differ on their conception of truth and its role in enquiry

Something seems to have gone missing in the account I have just sketched. For it entails the convergence of two ideas that we might think it important to keep apart: that of securing agreement among the members of a social practice, on the one hand, and that of getting something right, on the other. What has happened to truth? Can't entire communities of enquiry – physicists, lawyers, political theorists, and so on – sometimes be mistaken?

The role that truth plays – or doesn't play – in enquiry is the central fault line in recent work in pragmatism. Donald Davidson (1917-2003) and Rorty both make what, for philosophers in particular, is the striking claim that truth is not a goal of enquiry. They argue that, if an enquirer sets herself the goal of securing truth, in practice she can do no more than secure justification. If she has successfully justified a belief by persuading relevant others, in the light of the available reasons and evidence, she has done all that she can. In other words, there is no way in which enquirers might step over (in Rorty's preferred word) *Conversation* with each other and turn their attention directly to the truth.

In contrast to both Davidson and Rorty, some pragmatists argue that it is important to offer a substantive conception of truth. Peirce is often understood to have presented a theory of truth in which it is identified as what would be reached at the 'end of enquiry'. Critics such as Rorty have argued, though, that the notion of the end of enquiry is empty, for the reason that we could never know that we have reached it. But [Cheryl Misak](#) notes that the idea of the 'end of enquiry' is not the only understanding of Peirce's position, and in her work offers an alternative. She begins with the uncontroversial point that if I believe *That rose is red*, then I believe *That rose is red* is true. To this she adds that the conceptual connection between belief and truth commits one to holding one's beliefs to be responsible to the best evidence available. Misak develops her argument by drawing on other elements in Peirce's work, writing in *Truth, Politics, Morality* (1999) that:

a true belief is one that would withstand doubt, were we to enquire as far as we fruitfully could on the matter. A true belief is such that, no matter how much further we were to investigate and debate, that belief would not be overturned by recalcitrant experience and argument.

A true belief would be, in Misak's term, *indefeasible*. Truth as indefeasibility provides not a *goal* at which to aim, but rather a *method* by which enquiry should be conducted. A commitment to truth as indefeasibility commits enquirers to address reasons and arguments no matter where they come from, for as long as it is productive to do so.

The role that truth plays in enquiry divides contemporary pragmatists but, to use a pragmatic turn of phrase, I don't think it is a difference that makes a difference. All pragmatists think enquiry is a matter of responding to the doubt that emerges when our beliefs are called into question as we move through the world. And they all argue that we must give and ask for reasons from one another in our subsequent enquiries, for as long as it is fruitful to do so. The crucial point is not to confuse the findings of this process with truth.

Enquiry is experimental and fallible, and even the most promising conclusion, one to which we might be very confidently attached, may turn out not to be true. It is for this reason that Rorty thinks the one indispensable sense of the word 'true' is what he calls the *cautionary* –

‘justified, but maybe not true’ – a reminder of the fallibility of enquiry and the consequent need to keep the conversation open and going.

Pragmatists have often sought to explain exactly why democracy works (when it does)

The central theme running through what I have been saying is the importance of the social. The pragmatists, as we have seen, advance an image of enquiry on which the most important dimension is the horizontal relation between parties to conversation, rather than the vertical relation between subject and object. This thought has naturally led many pragmatists to examine what they take to be the political consequences of their philosophy, which they have done by paying particular attention to democracy.

Philosophers have very often been wary of democracy, with its pluralism, competing interests and constant trade-offs – the kind of contingencies that philosophy typically hopes to move beyond. Pragmatists think differently and have often sought to explain exactly why democracy works. These explanations have focused on the importance of the conditions required to facilitate enquiry and discussion of social questions. An important formulation is set out by Misak and by [Robert B Talisse](#), who argue that a commitment to democracy follows from our epistemic commitments. ‘In the moral and political realm,’ Misak argues, ‘[it] requires that everyone be given the chance to contribute to debate.’

Even when we are lucky enough to live in democratic societies, however, it remains the case that some people are not free to participate in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Many are constrained by the lack of economic means to do so, and many by gender or racial prejudice. One dimension of Cornel West’s work is to alert pragmatists to the lack of discussion of economics, racism and sexism in the work by earlier figures in the tradition. West argues, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), that the radical potential of pragmatism is ‘severely restricted by an ethnocentrism and a patriotism cognizant of the exclusion of peoples of colour, certain immigrants, and women yet fearful of the subversive demands these excluded peoples might make and enact.’

West and other pragmatists hold that at their best – but only at their best – democracies provide the conditions that enable everyone to thrive and develop. Some pragmatists have looked at the material conditions needed for us to do so. Talisse and Scott F Aikin endorse [John Rawls](#)’s difference principle, which holds that social and economic inequality is justified only if it most benefits the poorest members of society. This would, it seems clear, lead to considerable redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. Rawls (1921-2002) took the difference principle to be compatible with both capitalist and socialist economies. But, with an eye to what works, we see that seemingly free choices made by individuals in a capitalist economy are nothing of the kind. It may be that what is needed is not social democracy but socialism.

Final notes

Pragmatists tell us that an account of the world as it is in itself is not available to us. Instead, we press on, working to develop more effective and imaginative ways to cope with the world as we experience it.

Pragmatists have sometimes been tempted by the idea that pragmatism might contribute to a revolution in thought extending far beyond philosophy. Rorty and Hilary Putnam (1926-

2016) have both argued that pragmatism takes over the anti-authoritarianism central to the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers challenged the belief that respect and obedience are owed to God or the Church, arguing that authority must instead be validated through the exercise of reason. Rorty and Putnam describe Enlightenment philosophy as an advance over the other-worldliness of religion, while still retaining elements of the religious impulse. This is seen, they suggest, in its view that humans bear responsibility to identify timeless truths that exist beyond our experience, and that we should strive to achieve objectivity when this is taken to be something existing outside of our social practices. Pragmatism takes democratic consensus, freely arrived at, to be the only authority that we ought to acknowledge, and thus, Putnam and Rorty argue, completes the Enlightenment project. It does so by freeing us to pursue ends that we have chosen for ourselves, and by calling for society and its institutions to be structured so that they best protect that freedom.

This uplifting narrative is very appealing, but unhappily it runs against the emphasis pragmatists (Putnam and Rorty among them) place on the contingency of the world and of our dealings with it. The rise of nationalism throughout Europe and India, the revival of authoritarianism in Russia, the unfolding situation in the US, and the astonishingly fast descent into climate disaster, all press on us. Philosophy has sometimes promised a guaranteed escape from messes and disasters such as these, but pragmatism tells us that none is available.

For many, the hostility towards pragmatism originates in its psychologically unsatisfying lack of certainty. For if all principles are provisional, and all judgments subject to revision, then it becomes harder to anchor one's worldview. But it is pragmatism's hostility to dogmatism that can, I think, usefully be seen as the fulfilment of the Enlightenment ideal.

In a choice between psychologically satisfying dogmatism and psychologically unsatisfying uncertainty, pragmatism takes the harder road, suggesting that we must muddle through as best we can. It tells us, too, that any answers we come up with will be temporary and must give way when new problems emerge – which, pragmatists are clear, they inevitably will.

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