

Pragmatism's Family Feud: Peirce, James, and the Spirit of '72

Introduction

While William James and Charles Sanders Peirce are considered the two fathers of American Pragmatism, their overall philosophical outlooks were often remarkably different, with Peirce eventually labeling his position “Pragmaticism” to distinguish his views from those increasingly being associated with James.¹ A “two pragmatisms” narrative has remained with us ever since,² typically with the Peircian version being presented as the comparatively ‘objective’ alternative to metaphysical realism, and the Jamesian strand being castigated as an overly ‘subjective’ departure from Peirce’s position, a departure resulting from James’s soft spot for religious belief and his “almost unexampled incapacity for mathematical thought.”³

However, while James clearly does put more of an emphasis on ‘subjective’ factors than does Peirce, his doing so was often the result of his simply drawing out consequences of Peirce’s original framework. That framework was presented in an 1872 meeting of their ‘Metaphysical Club’ where James and Peirce (along with, among others, Oliver Wendel Holmes and Chauncy Wright) famously discussed a number of the core ideas that have been associated with pragmatism ever since.⁴ No official records were kept of those meetings, but it is believed that the two seminal papers that Peirce published five years later as “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878) were revisions of a draft that he originally delivered to the club.⁵ At roughly the time Peirce published these two papers, James published three of his first philosophical essays, essays that can be understood as responses to, and extensions of, their discussions of 1872. These papers, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence” (1878),⁶ “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879) and “Rationality, Activity and Faith (1882),⁷ laid the ground for a distinctly Jamesian strand of pragmatism.

¹ See Peirce (CP 5.414;1905). Though there is some questions of whether Peirce was concerned to distance himself from *James’s* position, rather than just the views found in the “literary journals” that were ‘inspired’ by James (for a discussion of this, see Pihlström, 2004, p. 28).

² See, for instance, Apel (1981), Mounce (1997), Haack (1998), Rescher (2000), and Misak (2000, 2013)

³ Peirce CP 6. 182; 1911.

⁴ For an extensive discussion of the club and its members, see Menand 2002.

⁵ Kiryushchenko 2016, p. 147.

⁶ Published in *Mind* in 1879, but written mostly in 1877 (Perry 1935, Vol 1, p. 782).

⁷ These last two were combined into the version of “The Sentiment of Rationality” that appeared in James 1897.

In particular, while Peirce was still flirting with idealism at the time,⁸ James's papers took those 1872 discussions, and teased out some of the consequences that followed once they were placed more firmly in a naturalistic, particularly Darwinian, framework. Peirce was never comfortable with these consequences, thinking that James carried pragmatism "too far",⁹ and in later work tried to distance himself from a number of positions defended in his earlier papers. James, by contrast, never rejected that early framework, which resulted in the increasing differences between the versions of pragmatism developed by the two. These differences show up most clearly in their conflicting conceptions of both when our beliefs are rationally justified, and what it would take for those beliefs to be true.

Peirce and James on the Justification of Belief

The first major difference between James and Peirce revolves around the question of when we are justified in adopting, or holding on to, particular beliefs. According to the standard 'two pragmatisms' narrative, Peirce defends the 'moderate' pragmatist position that combines fallibilism (the view that none of our beliefs can be established with absolute certainty) with a type of anti-skepticism ('critical commonsensism') that holds that such certainty isn't required for our beliefs to be justified. James, by contrast, pushed this to a type of 'extreme' pragmatism, where a belief's justification not only didn't require certainty, but also could be grounded entirely in the belief's ability to make us successful or even just happy.¹⁰ This characterization of James is certainly unfair, but it does reflect the fact that James did extend Peirce's position in ways that Peirce clearly wasn't happy with.

Peirce on the Fixation of Belief

Peirce and James both follow Alexander Bain's definition of belief as "that upon which a man is prepared to act" (a definition from which Peirce considered Pragmatism to be "scarce more than a corollary"),¹¹ and in "The Fixation of Belief" Peirce distinguishes belief and doubt in terms of the

⁸ See Meyers 2005, p. 326.

⁹ CP 8, 258, 1904.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Russell 1946.

¹¹ Peirce C.P 5.12, 1907.

fact that “beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions,”¹² while doubt “is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief.”¹³ A consequence of Peirce’s view is that states that don’t produce this sort of dissatisfaction aren’t *real* doubts at all, since “the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief.”¹⁴

For Peirce, real doubt produces a type of “anxiety”¹⁵ in us, and this “irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief.”¹⁶ Peirce refers to this struggle as “*inquiry*,” and the rest of “The Fixation of Belief” evaluates various methods of inquiry in terms of their ability to ‘fix’ our beliefs and produce a lasting end to doubt. These methods are meant to be evaluated *solely* on their ability to alleviate doubt, and crucially, not in terms of their ability to lead us to the truth. As Peirce puts it:

the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion. We may fancy that this is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false.¹⁷

The justification of our beliefs then, is understood not in terms of truth, but in terms of what produces a sustained feeling of justification (or, perhaps better, a sustained absence of doubt). That said, the conclusion that Peirce reaches will not be that far from one tied to the traditional search for truth, as he goes on to argue that the methods of “tenacity”, “authority” and the “a priori” method all fail to ‘fix’ belief adequately, and that it is only the “method of science” that can really do the job.

James and the Sentiment of Rationality

Some of these basic ideas from Peirce’s “Fixation of Belief” run through James’s own papers “The Sentiment of Rationality” and “Rationality, Activity, and Faith.” In particular, when James describes the sentiment of rationality as “This feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment, of

¹² Peirce 1877, p.114.

¹³ Peirce 1877, p.114.

¹⁴ Peirce 1877, p. 115. (See also Peirce 1868, pp. 28-29.)

¹⁵ Peirce 1868, p. 24.

¹⁶ Peirce 1877, p. 114.

¹⁷ Peirce 1877, pp. 114-115.

its absoluteness, -- this absence of all need to explain it, account for it, or justify it”,¹⁸ he is essentially describing the feeling that we have when our beliefs are entirely free from the ‘irritation’ of doubt. James’s investigation into what produces the sentiment of rationality, can also be seen as in line with Peirce’s project,¹⁹ but what is importantly novel to James is his contention that the irritation of doubt is produced not only by generally epistemic reasons (say, our discovering that our beliefs are inconsistent, or seem to contradict experience), but by ‘passional’ considerations as well. For instance, beliefs that frustrate our practical interests by suggesting that life is meaningless, and thus give us nothing to “press against” (James 1897, 70), produce a similar irritation and thus naturally come to be doubted.

It’s important to note that for James this is primarily a *negative* claim. It is not that a belief’s making us happy justifies us in believing it. Rather, it is that a belief’s leaving us unsatisfied can cause us to doubt it, so beliefs that go against our practical interests will be more difficult to ‘fix’ in precisely Peirce’s sense.

This won’t be the case with *every* ‘unhappy’ belief. I’m not happy about the fact that I’m loosing my hair, but that belief is confirmed every time that I look in the mirror, so the unhappiness doesn’t produce doubt. However, for the beliefs that lack such constant evidential support, doubts can arise. For James, the belief in materialism is a paradigm case of this. The fact that there couldn’t be anything ‘more’ than matter out there isn’t confirmed by everyday experience in the way that my hair loss is, and so doubts have the freedom to creep back in. Ockham’s razor might favor the materialistic theory, but James sees that as just a reflection of our “passion for parsimony” (James 1897, 58), leaving it a question of which passions carry the most weight for each believer. For those with the temperament that James characterizes as the “sick soul”,²⁰ the hypothesis that there is nothing more than matter will, in spite of its parsimony, always produce the feeling that it “just can’t be true” or “doesn’t make any sense”, and doubts will come in their trail.

We see another application of this approach in James’s discussion of nominalism, where he argues that we could never ‘fix’ on a nominalistic system even if it were consistent and ‘fit’ all of our

¹⁸ James 1897, p. 58.

¹⁹ See Lamberth 2014, p. 136.

²⁰ See James 1902, lectures 6 & 7.

experience, since doubts about the possibility of a more robust alternative would always arise.

a consistently nominalistic account of things could never be generally accepted as the truth—the craving for a plus ultra the instant phenomenon, shut off today, would reassert itself tomorrow in some new mode of formulation and breed an everlastingly self-renovating protest against the reduction of all reality to actuality. (James 1978, p. 367)

It is just such cases that go beyond the available empirical evidence that are of the most interest to James, and “The Sentiment of Rationality” was originally meant to be part of a work on the psychology of philosophy that would analyze what makes us find a particular *philosophical* system rational.²¹

James is often portrayed here as endorsing something like Peirce’s method of tenacity,²² and one prominent example that Peirce gives of this method is frequently read as directed at James:

Thus, if it be true that death is annihilation, then the man who believes that he will certainly go straight to heaven when he dies, provided he has fulfilled certain simple observances in this life, has a cheap pleasure which will not be followed by the least disappointment. A similar consideration seems to have weight with many versions in religious topics, for we frequently hear it said, “Oh, I could not believe so-and-so, because I should be wretched if I did.” (Peirce 1877, pp. 116)

However, tenacity involves holding on to a belief in the face of *contrary* evidence, and this is very different from refusing to adopt a belief that you aren’t evidentially compelled to hold. James is defending the more modest claim that a view that truly makes someone “wretched” will “afflict the mind with a ceaseless uneasiness”²³ and thus lead it to be doubted if compelling reason isn’t given for it.

Religious belief was the highest profile example of such an evidence-transcendent case,²⁴ but the range of such beliefs was considerably larger, and more general methodological assumptions such

²¹ He later suggested that “The Psychology of Philosophizing” would have been a better title for the essay (James 1978, p. 359.).

²² Many (starting at least with Dewey (1916) and running up through Misak (2013, p. 64)) thought the Peirce himself read James this way.

²³ James 1897, p. 100.

²⁴ And I should note that there is thus some fairness in Aikin’s complaint (Aikin 2014, pp. 85, 175) that James’s suggestion in “The Will to Believe” that he is providing a justification of the religious beliefs of his undergraduate audience amounts to something of a ‘bait and switch’, since while his own “religious hypothesis” (“the best things are the more eternal things”, and we are better off for believing that (James 1897, pp. 29-30)) is arguably an evidence-transcendent one, the religious beliefs of some of his audience (such as that the earth was created in 7 days about 6000 years ago) arguably *do* go against the available evidence.

as that the future would be like the past, that our investigations would lead to the truth, or that our beliefs were capable of being true at all arguably all fell into this camp. James rejected transcendental arguments guaranteeing the truth of such ‘regulative’ principles, but he insisted that we still had the right to believe in them, since such beliefs all fall into the class where, in Peirce’s own terms, we “begin with all the prejudices which we actually have,” and for which we don’t have any “positive reason to doubt” (Peirce 1868, pp. 28, 29). But while Peirce relied on such ‘regulative ideals’ as well, he eventually argued that James’s epistemology was too permissive, and that while we were entitled to *hope* that such regulative principles were true, we weren’t entitled to *believe* in them.²⁵

Unfortunately, Peirce’s appeal to hope in these cases runs into problems with the earlier account of belief and its connection to action. If belief really is “that upon which a man is prepared to act”, and hopes are capable of producing the same habits of action as beliefs, then it would seem that these hopes should also count as beliefs themselves.²⁶ One needs to find some behavioral difference between belief and hope in these cases, and since the obvious suggestion that we often don’t act on our hopes isn’t going to work here, Peirce seems to find his difference between his special action-guiding version of hope and belief in the way that the two states are responsive to evidence. While James characterized faith “belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible” (James 1893, p. 76), Peirce imagined faith to be something stronger, in particular, he took it to produce a type of belief that was actively *resistant* to contrary evidence. According to Peirce, while faith was “highly necessary in affairs”, it was “ruinous in practice” because “you are not going to be alert for indications that the moment has come to change your tactics” (CP 8.251, 1897, CWJ 8:244). However, faith (especially in James’s thin sense) needn’t be viewed as having this consequence, and there is no reason for James to think that we couldn’t remain fallibilists for beliefs based on faith.²⁷ It may be that Peirce was misled by James’s later talk about belief in terms of a “willingness to act irrevocably” (James 1893, p.14) but that willingness should be understood as willingness to take an irrevocable action (such as the mountain

²⁵ See Misak 2013, pp. 50-52.

²⁶ See Jackman 2020, and Pihlström 2004 pp. 40-41.

²⁷ Indeed, he seems to explicitly contrast his more fallibilist version of faith with the uncritical version that Peirce considers in James 1897, p. 79 (with the more uncritical conception of faith being associated, as was sadly typical of James, with Catholicism).

climber's leaping over the canyon),²⁸ not as an irrevocable willingness to act in a certain way (such as the aforementioned mountain climber continuing to believe that he can make the jump as he plummets into the abyss).²⁹

Peirce famously said that the motto that “deserves to be inscribed upon every wall in the city of philosophy” was “Do not block the path of inquiry” (CP 1.135), and while James would certainly agree with this, the two early pragmatists had very different ideas about what would block inquiry. James understood inquiry in evolutionary terms, and so he was in favor of a comparatively promiscuous set of starting points combined with a confidence that experience would weed out candidates that conflicted with it.³⁰ For James, proliferation and selection was seen as the best way for inquiry to succeed. It was the *responsiveness* of our attitudes to experience that was of primary importance, and a belief that we give up in the light of contrary experience will be more responsive than a ‘hope’ that we cling to come what may.

Peirce and James on the Nature of Truth

The difference between James's and Peirce's views on the fixation of belief had immediate consequences for their conceptions of truth when these views of justification are used to fill out the Peircian idea that “what we mean by the truth” is the “opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate.”³¹

Peirce's tying truth to our practices of inquiry represents a decisive break from the sort of metaphysical realism that makes the truth about the world radically independent (at least in principle) from what we might come to know about it. Nevertheless, Peirce's comparatively conservative conception of inquiry made the break less radical than it became for James.

²⁸ Indeed, it isn't far from Peirce's own characterization of “Full belief” as a “willingness to act upon the proposition in vital crises” (RLT 112).

²⁹ Russell 1946, p. 815, Aikin 2014 (p. 90) and Atkins 2016 pp. 26-30, seem to follow Peirce in misreading James in this way.

³⁰ See, Klein 2013. It often isn't appreciated how this evolutionary model puts an underlying *social* foundation to James's epistemology. The epistemic norms that he recommends are the ones that he thinks be most successful for a *population* of inquirers.

³¹ Peirce 1878a, pp. 138-139. See also Peirce 1868, pp. 52, 54-55.

For James, if truth is tied to inquiry in the way that Peirce suggests, then *any* factors that contribute to inquiry have the potential to contribute to truth, and so it seemed to James that metaphysical systems that frustrate our practical needs could never be true, because doubts are invariably bound to arise about them. As he put it in his notes on “The Sentiment of Rationality”

If universal acceptance be, as it surely is, the only mark of truth which we possess, then any system certain not to get it, may be deemed false without further ceremony, false at any rate for us, which is as far as we can inquire.³²

It needn't follow from this that every *pleasant* ideas would thereby be *true*. (Though James is often accused of thinking this.) Such ideas may tempt us, but if they bump up against recalcitrant experience, doubts will arise, and so they will also fail to be true. James's conception of truth is not, then, more forgiving than Peirce's. On the contrary, it is significantly more demanding. To be ‘absolutely’³³ true, a belief must *not only* fit with current and future experience in the way that Peirce requires, *but also* be in line with our ‘spontaneous powers’ in the way that James describes.³⁴

While Peirce may have identified truth with the “opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate”, he had little enthusiasm for James's idea that such ultimate agreement must account for our passional nature.³⁵ Indeed, Peirce drew an increasingly bright line between his “all who investigate” and James's “universal acceptance”, and placed a number of implicit restrictions on his community of inquiry that would have been quite alien to James.

If James was right about the contributions of our practical interests to the sowing of doubt, then it's quite possible that no system of the world could ever be ‘fixed’ in the sense that Peirce's account of truth requires. Peirce was aware of this, and even in his original paper, he admits that truth might not be understandable in terms of *human* inquiry:

³² Notes on “The Sentiment of Rationality”, in James 1978, p. 360.

³³ To the extent that James is very forgiving in his talk of truth, it is for the more “temporary truths” that represent the temporary resting points of inquiry, not the “absolute” truth that is cashed out in these Peircian terms. (See James 1907, pp. 106-107.)

³⁴ For a discussion of how this leads James to a type of pessimism about the prospects of our attaining absolute truth, see Jackman 2019, forthcoming.

³⁵ Indeed, over the years he drifted away from understanding truth in terms of “agreement” at all, replacing it with something closer to a belief's ‘indefeasibility’ (see Misak 2013).

Our perversity and that of others may indefinitely postpone the settlement of opinion; it might even conceivably cause an arbitrary proposition to be universally accepted as long as the human race should last. Yet even that would not change the nature of the belief, which alone could be the result of investigation carried sufficiently far; and if, after the extinction of our race, another should arise with faculties and disposition for investigation, that true opinion must be the one which they would ultimately come to. (Peirce 1878a, 139)

Of course, *simply* appealing to a possible future race isn't really going to help, since exactly the same 'perversity' might arise with them, and even if there eventually were a future race that got things right, after *their* extinction, there might be yet another race whose investigation drifted towards a contrary opinion.

It is for these reasons that for Peirce, the "all" in "all who investigate" is implicitly restricted to a community of scientists.³⁶ Indeed, not only a community of scientists, but a community of idealized Peircian scientists who lack any sort of practical interest that might affect inquiry in any of the ways that James highlights. The Peircian scientist is, after all, supposed to have no 'vital' interests,³⁷ and while this idealized inquirer can seem noticeably inhuman, it may be the only thing that can be plugged into Peirce's definition that would give him the results he wants. What Peirce needs is a set of 'ideal' successors, where this idealization includes a lack of interest in practical matters (or perhaps just a restriction of these practical interests to the pursuit of the "development of concrete reasonableness").³⁸

The superiority of the scientific method was argued for in "The Fixation of Belief" in terms of that being the best method of fixing belief and eliminating doubt. However, Peirce's argument can seem a little disingenuous if it turns out that this method only works if you restrict yourself to a sub-community of disinterested scientists. If we only achieve community consensus by whittling down the community, defenders of the other methods could help themselves to this strategy as well. After all, Peirce himself says that The Method of Authority might be the best for "the mass of mankind,"³⁹ with only the doubts of "a few individuals" persisting in the "most priest-ridden states."⁴⁰ If the method of science can only permanently fix belief when we restrict ourselves to a

³⁶ For further discussion of how James and Peirce differ in the size of the community that they are willing to tie truth to, see Klein 2013.

³⁷ See his claim that "pure science has nothing at all to do with *action*" and so "what is properly and usually called *belief*. . . has no place in science at all" (Peirce 1898, p. 112).

³⁸ See Peirce 1902.

³⁹ Peirce 1877, p. 118.

⁴⁰ Peirce 1877, p. 118.

possible future race of passionless scientists, the defender of authority might rightly insist that they could successfully fix beliefs as well by restricting *their* community to an excessively differential set of possible successors.

If all of the methods can fix beliefs equally well by restricting their communities in this way, Peirce's preference for the scientific method may just be a reflection of the fact that it is the method that works best for those with his particular temperament,⁴¹ but while Peirce was happy to understand truth in terms of something like these passionless inquirers, James sees little reason to think that *we* should judge ourselves by the standards of this possible future race. Indeed, James addresses just this issue in a paper published in the same year as "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence". While that paper presents itself as a critique of Herbert Spencer's work, one of the main issues that he took Spencer to task for (the prospect of a purely 'disinterested' intellect) was precisely the issue that here divides James and Peirce.⁴²

James's inclusion of fully human inquirers, passions and all, into the community which could determine the truth also made his version of pragmatism more open to the possibility of their being *normative* truths,⁴³ and his remarks on Spencer ends with a defense of the potential objectivity of such normative truths that is cashed out in explicitly Peircian terms.

Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action—action which to a great extent transforms the world—help to *make* the truth which they declare. In other words, there belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere looker-on; and its judgments of the *should-be*, its ideals, cannot be peeled off from the body of the *cogitandum* as if they were excrescences... The only objective criterion of reality is coerciveness, in the long run, over thought. Objective facts, Spencer's outward relations, are real only because they coerce sensation. Any interest which should be coercive on the same massive scale would be *eodem jure* real.... If judgments of the *should-be* are fated to grasp us in this way, they are what "correspond." (James 1878, pp. 21-22)

Conclusion:

⁴¹ Indeed, he suggests as much himself (Peirce 1877, 119-120).

⁴² While James was free with his attacks on Spencer, he was always reluctant to explicitly criticize Peirce (especially in print).

⁴³ Though some Peircians, particularly Misak 2000 and Heney 2016, argue that this can be done within a strictly Peircian framework as well.

James's first biographer, Ralph Barton Perry, notoriously claimed that "the modern movement known as pragmatism is largely the result of James's misunderstanding of Peirce",⁴⁴ but in many respects James understood Peirce all too well. He adopted Peirce's central ideas of understanding inquiry in terms of what could 'fix' belief, and truth in terms of what inquiry would converge upon, but did so while holding on to the idea that we were looking at specifically *human* inquiry, and rejecting Peirce's frankly Procrustean conception of who the pragmatist's inquirer must be. The resulting view was often a more radical departure from the traditional conception of truth and inquiry than Peirce presented, but it remained a natural extension of the central tenets of their original 1872 discussions.

⁴⁴ Perry 1935, Vol. 2, p. 409.

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