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# Pragmatism and Philosophical Methods

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Philosophical methodology is the central focus of pragmatism’s founding documents.[[1]](#footnote-2) The early works of Peirce, James, and Deweyexamine methodological questions such as ‘how do we make philosophical ideas clear?’, ‘what is the best method for fixing belief?’ and ‘how do we know whether a philosophical question is answerable?’. Thus, many consider pragmatism inherently methodological – as a metaphilosophy, a view about how philosophy should or must be done (e.g. Talisse 2017). Any summary of pragmatist methods is therefore a summary of pragmatism itself. Given such an impossibly broad remit, this chapter does only three things. First, it provides four broad claims common to pragmatist approaches to philosophical methodology, claims reflecting its underlying theory of inquiry. Second, it briefly examines three core pragmatist methods – for conceptual clarification, for fixing belief, and for settling or dissolving philosophical disputes. Third, it briefly describes differences between the Classical figures regarding each method. This is merely a brief sketch – the reader should consider all entries in this volume relevant to pragmatism *qua* philosophical method.

## 1: Pragmatists on Inquiry

Pragmatist ideas about philosophical method emerge from two main sources – its critique of Cartesianism (beginning with Peirce’s *cognition* series, CP 5.213-5.317) and its theory of inquiry (Peirce’s *Fixation,* CP 5.358, and *Ideas*, CP 5.388). While each of these sources are rich, detailed, and sophisticated, these four claims provide a first approximation:

1. Given that all beliefs are fallible, philosophical theorizing must begin with common sense beliefs, not with propositions taken or shown to be certain, self-evident, apodictic, etc.
2. Philosophers should question these beliefs only when we encounter legitimate grounds for doing so, not based on the mere possibility of error. Legitimate grounds may take the form of *recalcitrant experiences* (*actual* for James, *actual or possible* for Peirce) or *indeterminate situations* (Dewey).
3. Inquiry is a collective or dialogic long-term effort by an indefinitely large community to arrive at stable beliefs that ‘work’ or are ‘satisfactory’, rather than a solitary inquirer’s quest for certainty.[[2]](#footnote-3)
4. Only inquiries concerning propositions with pragmatic meaning – those that pass the pragmatic maxim’s test of legitimacy – can be successful. It will be idle and pointless to inquire into the truth or falsity of pragmatically empty and thus illegitimate propositions.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Talisse 2017 argues that there is a marked historical trajectory within the pragmatist tradition concerning the scope or significance of such claims. Talisse calls this trajectory ‘metaphilosophical creep’ and describes it as follows:

Peirce originally proposed a semantic rule for philosophical enquiry that was transformed by James into a method for re-describing traditional philosophical problems as expressions of psychological differences; Dewey expanded pragmatism further into a full-bore metaphilosophical platform, a comprehensive second-order vision that fixes first-order philosophical views and so ultimately treats all purportedly philosophical disputes as metaphilosophical disputes.

While not all scholars will accept this characterization, it nevertheless captures a crucial point of contention. One way to understand pragmatism is as a method *only* – a way of clarifying ideas that merely facilitates philosophical inquiry. Others consider it more radical – as the attempt to ‘renew’ or ‘reconstruct’ philosophy altogether by identifying and discarding ‘perennial’ problems (e.g. skepticism) and/or entire sub-disciplines (e.g. metaphysics, epistemology), transforming it into a mechanism for democratic or political growth and cultural criticism.[[4]](#footnote-5) This has led some scholars to argue that there are at least *two* pragmatisms (e.g. Mounce 2002, Misak 2013).

Thus, despite deep affinities, pragmatists disagree about some aspects of methodology and sometimes exhibit internal inconsistency or changes of heart. The remaining sections therefore treat the three key figures – Peirce, James, and Dewey – separately, making brief note of some of these tensions.

## Peirce on Clarifying Concepts

Peirce wrote that pragmatism is “a method of reflexion having for its purpose to render ideas clear.” (CP 5.13, n1, 1906). His first 1878 formulation of the ‘pragmatic maxim’ governing this method reads: “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.” Thus, as a first approximation, pragmatists claim that clarifying a concept requires identifying the practical effects or consequences that follow from its correct application. Those wishing to *test* a philosophical hypothesis should first deduce from it such practical consequences, just as we might test a scientific hypothesis by similarly constructing a real or simulated experiment.

Peirce’s initial formulation of the maxim suggests that practical consequences *alone* matter in conceptual clarification, a suggestion he later corrects.[[5]](#footnote-6) This is because he changed his mind concerning ‘scholastic realism’, or the view that reality contains real generality as well as individuals, which transformed his understanding of the maxim.[[6]](#footnote-7) Thus, I focus instead on this 1903 formulation:

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood*.*[[7]](#footnote-8)

The maxim is a rule for clarifying what Peirce called ‘intellectual concepts’.[[8]](#footnote-9) He argued against the view, popular in the late 19th century, that this merely involved making them ‘clear and distinct’ (*a la* Descartes and Leibniz). To possess ‘clearness’, Peirce writes, is “merely to have such an acquaintance with the idea as to have become familiar with it, and to have lost all hesitancy in recognizing it in ordinary cases”. It is to have “a subjective feeling of mastery” that “may be entirely mistaken”. To possess ‘distinctness’ is to be able to give “a precise definition” of the idea “in abstract terms.” As Peirce understood them, traditional methods assume that we achieve the maximum level of clarity about an idea by refining distinctness – that is, tinkering with our definition – until either we have a clear apprehension of everything it contains (Leibniz) or it withstands dialectical examination (Descartes). Though he admits that distinctness is “indispensable to exact reasoning”, Peirce claims that “Nothing new can ever be learned by analyzing definitions” and suggests that full clarity about an idea requires something more.[[9]](#footnote-10) He argues for a third grade of clarity that relies fundamentally on the concept of reality - scholars typically call this the concept’s ‘pragmatic meaning’.

Suppose a student learns to recognize samples of lithium in her high school chemistry class, by reference to its peculiar metallic luster.[[10]](#footnote-11) She becomes confident in picking out samples of lithium, at least in the classroom setting. She thereby attains first grade clarity about the proposition ‘this substance is lithium’. When she subsequently learns that ‘lithium’ is defined as *the chemical element with atomic number 3*, she thereby achieves second grade clarity.

Peirce would argue that something vital remains missing from the student’s understanding, namely lithium’s *practical or experiential* meaning. For Peirce, this is how reality manifests for us in the context of inquiry – as a resistance, compulsion, or surprise that we experience when we try to act in certain ways (e.g. when we conduct experiments).[[11]](#footnote-12) Thus, while she remains unaware of the following ‘conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood’, the student’s grasp of lithium will be inadequate (and dangerously so!): *if you expose lithium to water, expect it to ignite, burn, and possibly explode.* Thus, third grade clarifications tell us what experiences to expect and reactions to prepare when we interact with instances of the relevant idea – something that neither clearness nor distinctness supply.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Peirce’s method rests on a controversial assumption about meaning, in this case that *a person who knows that lithium ignites in water understands the meaning of ‘lithium’ better than someone who does not*.[[13]](#footnote-14) More schematically, Peirce is claiming that the practical consequences of a concept’s true application are not only an important part of its meaning, but in some sense the most fundamental part.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Most semantic theories entail that while true and informative, such a subjunctive conditional nevertheless says nothing about either the *literal* *meaning* or the essence of ‘lithium’, which are instead exhausted by its proper definition or analysis. Instead, the conditional seemingly expresses a fact about *lithium itself* (the *substance* or *property*)*,* not a fact about our *conception* *of* lithium (the *word* or *idea*). Thus, Peirce’s method will strike many as conflating *words* or *concepts* with the *things* (entities or properties) they pick out.

Some pragmatists concede this point and stipulate that “the meaning in which Peirce is primarily interested is not fixed semantic meaning, but meaning… as it differently informs our practices depending on our context and goals.” (Dea 2015, p. 416).[[15]](#footnote-16) Others seek to refute the objection, typically referencing Peirce’s realist metaphysics, his career-long war against nominalism, and his theory of signs. Mounce, for example, writes:

[Peirce] is accused of attempting to derive conclusions about the world from the study of linguistic or logical forms. But that criticism is based on the very assumption of an absolute gulf between language or logic on the one hand and the world on the other, which it is precisely Peirce’s intention to deny.[[16]](#footnote-17)

## Peirce on Fixing Belief

Though Peirce sometimes implies the maxim alone *is* pragmatism, he also sometimes recognizes that his views on doubt (an unsettled, dissatisfied state), belief (that it incorporates a stable disposition to act in certain ways), and the transition between them (inquiry) are also crucial.[[17]](#footnote-18) Once we have an idea that is clear at the third grade (for a given context), we still require a method for ‘fixing our beliefs’ about specific hypotheses involving that idea.

Suppose the teacher presents our chemistry student with a sample of what *appears* to be lithium and asks her to determine whether the hypothesis ‘this is lithium’ is true or false. Applying the pragmatic maxim suggests appropriate ways to test the hypothesis, such as placing the sample in water. Knowing the ‘sensible effects’ with ‘practical bearings’ that follow if a hypothesis is true, thus facilitates the fixation of belief via the ‘method of science’.

Peirce describes and argues for this method by contrasting it with three historically significant alternatives, which involve fixing belief through: tenacious wishful thinking; deference to some comprehensive authority (such as a religious or political authority); and *a priori* reflection on what is ‘agreeable to reason’. He argues all three methods are inferior in their capacity to fix belief permanently and defines the method of science as resting on a ‘fundamental hypothesis’ that there…

…are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion. The new conception here involved is that of Reality. (CP 5.384)

## James on Dissolving Pseudo-Problems

James hugely admired Peirce’s maxim and set out to popularize, apply, and extend it in novel ways. However, in announcing ‘the pragmatic method’ to the world in 1898, James repeated Peirce’s initial misleading overstatement of the maxim, essentially eliminating the first two grades of clarity:

To develop a thought’s meaning we need *only* determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its *sole* significance… To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need *only* consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us *the whole of* our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. (1898, p. 290-291, my emphasis)

James was also more strident in describing its philosophical significance. He saw its purpose not solely as clarifying concepts and facilitating inquiry, but as solving or *dis*solving numerous philosophical (and especially *metaphysical*) (pseudo-)problems.

Peirce himself laid the groundwork for this much bolder interpretation of the maxim when he applied the maxim to various philosophical debates (e.g. transubstantiation, free will), effectively claiming to have reduced them to merely verbal disputes.[[18]](#footnote-19) While Peirce’s later change of heart about realism arguably undercuts this early deflationism, James doubles down: “It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test.” (1898, p. 292) James says of the debate between materialism and theism: “if no future detail of experience or conduct is to be deduced from our hypothesis, the debate… becomes quite idle and insignificant.” (2018 [1907], p. 3953).[[19]](#footnote-20) He also adds a novel element, diagnosing such disputes in terms of competing philosophical ‘temperaments’, seemingly reducing them to mere expressions of psychological differences.

One key reason for this divergence between the two men is that James’s interpretation of ‘practical differences’ was significantly narrower than Peirce’s.[[20]](#footnote-21) He believed philosophy sought to ‘find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the one which is true.’ (1898, p. 292**).** His most notorious application of this approach was to the hypothesis of God’s existence in *The Will to Believe.[[21]](#footnote-22)* Peirce, by contrast, sought only to identify what *possible* differences it could make to some actual *or hypothetical* scenario if a proposition were true, and his conception of truth very deliberately references an indefinitely large community of inquiry working over the indefinitely long-run, not any particular individual, group, or time.[[22]](#footnote-23) In addition, James appears to include as genuine practical consequences the effects of *believing* the relevant *‘*formula’, allowing the desirability of these consequences to weigh in its favor, at least under certain carefully specified conditions.[[23]](#footnote-24) Many scholars speculate that it was this controversial modification of his maxim that prompted Peirce to rename his position ‘pragmaticism’.

**Dewey on Social and Political Philosophy**

Dewey too eventually came to greatly admire Peirce – particularly his theory of inquiry, maxim, and scientific metaphysics. Dewey also modified and extended pragmatic methods in important ways, particularly into new areas such as ethics, politics, and social philosophy.[[24]](#footnote-25) Heney 2016 identifies three main methodological continuities between Dewey and his predecessors:

(1) a broad conception of experience,

(2) the central role of regulative assumptions, and

(3) the conception of inquiry (including ethical inquiry) as aiming at truth.

Regarding (1), Dewey embraces Peirce’s conception of experience as compulsion, reaction, or ‘that which surprises’, which had enabled Peirce “to count manipulations of mental diagrams and processing of thought experiments as ways of gathering experience”.[[25]](#footnote-26) Dewey also emphasizes the important role of the experiences of *others*, extending Peirce’s insight about the role of the *community* in inquiry by emphasizing a novel element – the idea “that some of the evidence garnered by taking the experience of our fellows into account is distinctively moral in character and can be put to work in developing better habits.”[[26]](#footnote-27) Finally, Dewey emphasizes the ways that experience is *transactional* – that is, it involves a dynamic interaction between an organism and its environment, not a mere passive receptivity of the sort he frequently denounces as a mere ‘spectator theory of knowledge’.[[27]](#footnote-28) This emerges from Dewey’s novel analysis of ‘means’ and ‘ends’ in his celebrated early work on ‘the reflex arc’ (which Mounce 2002 calls ‘one of his finest achievements’, p. 131).

Regarding (2), Dewey recognizes the reliance upon *regulative assumptions –* principles that describe our logical habits – as the best alternative to a Cartesian focus on ultimate and invariant first principles. The assumptions are *regulative* because the only vindication they can receive is *practical*, rather than metaphysical. Heney writes:

to consider whether or not a principle is vindicated in pragmatism, look to the consequences of treating that principle as a working hypothesis for action and deliberation. It is not the task of a principle such as that of bivalence to prove itself true; if it proves itself the right kind of instrument for the project of inquiry, no further justification of its adoption can be demanded.[[28]](#footnote-29)

Where Dewey departs from his predecessors is equally important. First, Dewey transcends Peirce and James’s approach by extending it into social and political philosophy, developing – with Jane Addams – extraordinarily influential accounts of education and democracy in the process.[[29]](#footnote-30) Forstenzer 2019 argues compellingly that a consequence of this extension is an original form of experimentalism in political philosophy, which rivals the Rawlsian/ideal-theory mainstream. Second, although Dewey may agree with the Peircean idea of inquiry being bound up with truth, he nevertheless largely jettisons the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ in favor of ‘warranted assertibility’. It appears that he does so primarily to pre-empt the problematic misunderstandings of knowledge and truth that he sees as part and parcel of “perennial philosophy”. [[30]](#footnote-31) But some have argued that in doing so he betrays Peirce’s commitment to a genuinely objective conception of inquiry and lays the groundwork for the Rortyan, ‘post-truth’ understanding of philosophical method.[[31]](#footnote-32)

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1. West 1989 describes them as ‘preoccupied with method’ (p. 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In precisely what sense they must ‘work’ or be ‘satisfactory’ is a point of significant tension and disagreement among pragmatists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. To some this claim foreshadows verificationism (Misak 1995), while others argue these affinities are often overstated (Potter 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See e.g. Rorty’s 2007 vision of philosophy as ‘cultural politics’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. CP 8.218, 1910. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For a comprehensive treatment, see e.g. Lane 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. CP 5.18. See Hookway 2012 and Short 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. It is neither a fully-fledged theory of *all* linguistic meaning, nor does it presuppose one (Short 2017). Also, as Almeder 1979 writes: “in spite of the unfortunate phraseology, the pragmatic maxim, as stated, is not so much a criterion for the meaning of concepts or words as it is a criterion for the meaning of certain propositions or sentences… [for Peirce] talking about the meaning of a concept or a word is in fact talking about the meaning of a sentence or proposition…” (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Given his later change of heart about the maxim, the quoted claim might be an overstatement, though see e.g. Wilson 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. This example is inspired by De Waal 2013, p. 4 and CP 2.330, 1902. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See e.g. McLaughlin 2009, p. 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Peirce’s 1878 formulation says that the perhaps infinite list of conditionals describing how lithium behaves in various possible contexts constitutes ‘the whole of’ our conception of lithium. This can give the impression that Peirce was wholly dismissing the significance of the first two grades of clarity, something he later denied (CP 8.218, 1910). The 1903 formulation allows that the other grades still have significance, albeit only *derivatively* from those conditionals, that is, from their ‘tendency to enforce’ them. Peirce is probably alluding to final causation here, *per* Hulswit 1997 and Short 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Peirce’s response to a dispute between Newton and Kirchhoff concerning force, summarized in Dea 2015, pp. 414-415. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. In precisely what sense, it is notoriously difficult to say. See e.g. Wilson 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See also Hookway 2015, p. 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Mounce 2002, p. 23. This foreshadows the ‘linguistic turn’, per Rorty 1967. On Peirce’s realism see Lane 2018, on his anti-nominalism, see Forster 2011, and on his theory of signs Short 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See his remarks on Bain at CP 5.12, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. On transubstantiation see Talisse 2017. On free will see Howat 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Peirce also opposes materialism, but it is unclear whether he does so on grounds of simple pragmatic illegitimacy. See e.g. Tiller 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. James himself says he construes the maxim more ‘broadly’ (p. 291), but what he presumably means here is that on his understanding it has broader *implications*, which only occurs if one narrows the *criteria* so that fewer conceptions and metaphysical hypotheses pass the test of legitimacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Or so it is popularly assumed. In reality James defends the claims that *the best things are the more eternal things* and that *we are better off if we believe this fact.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Boncompagni 2016 writes: “Peirce highlights precisely the exigency of not talking about a single action, nor about a set of actions, as consequences of a concept, but of a habit of conduct, that is of a *general* determination which includes not only what happens but what *could* happen.” (pp. 146-147). He also emphasized that our concepts are interconnected, so that inquiry will have to be holistic and continuous (see Dea 2015, p. 410). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. See e.g. Bacon 2012, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. On Peirce’s difficult relationship with such ‘vital matters’, see Atkins 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Heney 2016, p. 55. Thus, a student conducting employing measurements/diagrams in her mathematics class may also be correctly applying the third grade of clarity, even if the ‘experiments’ she performs take place entirely in her own mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. *Ibid.* p. 56. On the question of how Peirce might have extended his method to incorporate ethical and political inquiry, compare Misak 1999 with Atkins 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. See e.g. Hildebrand 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. *Ibid.* p. 57. See also Hookway 1985, pp. 77-9 on Peirce’s classification of the sciences, and/or Howat 2015 on *‘quietist* grounding’. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. See esp. Dewey 1916. Shields 2017, p. 23 addresses Addams’ role viz. the account of democracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. See Dewey 1938. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. See Misak 2013 and Forstenzer 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)