McCall Pragmatism Presentation

Ancient and Medieval Philosophies

* The word pragmatism was introduced into philosophy as the name for a principle of logic, “a method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words and abstract conceptions” (CP 5.464), and “a method of determining the meanings of intellectual concepts, that is, of those upon which reasoning may hinge” (CP 5.467).
* The specific purpose of pragmatism was to clarify, if not outright eliminate as meaningless, traditional metaphysical questions (CP 5.2).
* Peirce’s pragmatism was “designed” and constructed “architectonically” (CP 5.5). As a doctrine, pragmatism must be understood as “concerning the logic of abduction”, in a context of relating it to induction and deduction (CP 5.179).
* Peirce never attempted to fully flesh out his system of thought, but rather attempted “to make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical sciences, in history, in sociology, and any other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details” (CP 1.1).
* When Peirce’s writings are seen with respect to his development of pragmatism, it is beneficial to divide them up into two groups: those prior to 1893, and those after 1893 (Thompson, xv).
* “Traditional logic”, according to Peirce, is the “principal alternative” to his system of pragmatics (CP 5.500).
* In his article entitled, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877), which appeared in *Popular Science Monthly*, Peirce discussed four different methods of fixing belief:
  + The method of tenacity.
  + The method of authority.
  + The *a priori* method.
  + And the method of science.
* The method of tenacity “will be unable to hold its ground in practice. The social impulse is against it… unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other’s opinions; so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community” (CP 5.378).
* As a result, a second method, arising from the weaknesses of the first, consists in letting “the will of the state act… instead of the individual” (CP 5.379); this institution has for its object “to keep correct doctrines before the attention of the people, to reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the young; having at the same time power to prevent contrary doctrines from being taught, advocated, or expressed” (CP 5.380) – this method is that of authority.
  + “in fact, for the mass of mankind,… there is perhaps no better method than this,” since “if it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain” (CP 5.381).
  + However, such a method is beset by manifold weaknesses in that it is subject to restricted communities, for even “in the most priest ridden states some individuals will be found who… possess a wider sort of social feeling; they see that men in other countries and in other ages have held to very different doctrines from those which they themselves have been brought up to believe; and they cannot help seeing that it is the mere accident of their having been taught as they have, and of their having been surrounded with the manners and associations they have, that has caused them to believe as they do and not far differently” (CP 5.381).
* Yet another method arises, naturally, to remedy the problems of this second method; to the extent that the “action of natural preferences” is left “unimpeded” in the community, people “conversing together and regarding matters in different lights, gradually develop beliefs in harmony with natural causes. This method resembles that by which conceptions of art have been brought to maturity. The most perfect example of it is to be found in the history of metaphysical philosophy. Systems of this sort have not usually rested upon any observed facts, at least not in any great degree. They have been chiefly adopted because their fundamental propositions seemed “agreeable to reason” (CP 5.382).
* There is yet a third approach, the *a priori* method, that drives us toward a “true induction” (CP 5.383).
  + However, the a priori method fails “to deliver our opinions from their accidental and capricious element,” in that, while the development to which it gives rise “is a process which eliminates the effect of some casual circumstances, only magnifies that of others. This method, therefore, does not differ in a very essential way from that of authority.” Hence, in order to satisfy our doubts, “it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (CP 5.384).
  + But “our external permanency would not be external, in our sense, if it was restricted in its influence to one individual. It must be something which affects, or might affect, every man. And, though these affections are necessarily as various as are individual conditions, yet the method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same,” or, as Peirce added in 1903, “would be the same if inquiry were sufficiently persisted in” (CP 5.384).
* “Such is the method of science,” and “its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language, is this: 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” (CP 5.384).
* This fourth method, that of science, Peirce finds, does not have the weaknesses of the previous three; indeed, while “investigation cannot be regarded as proving that there are Real things, it at least does not lead to a contrary conclusion; but the method and the conception on which it is based remain ever in harmony” (CP 5.384).
* Hence, “no doubts of the method… necessarily arise from its practice, as is the case with all the others” (CP 5.385).
* However, nobody can “really doubt that there are Reals, for if he did, doubt would not be a source of dissatisfaction. The hypothesis, therefore is one which every mind admits,” so that the social impulse does not cause people to doubt it” (CP 5.385).
* Everybody uses the scientific method about a great many things, and only ceases to use it when they do not know how to apply it; “experience of the method has not led us to doubt it, but, on the contrary, scientific investigation has had the most wonderful triumphs in the way of settling opinion” (CP 5.385).
* The scientific method is further differentiated form the others in that it is the only one “which presents any distinction of a right and wrong way” (CP 5.385); it is impossible to use the method of tenacity the wrong way because in using it, one shuts himself off from all other influences; moreover, the same is true of the method of authority because in that case, the only test is what the state thinks; and, finally, the same is true of the a priori method because its very essence is to think as one is inclined to think.
* But in pursuing the scientific method, the test of correct usage “is not an immediate appeal to my feelings and purposes, but, on the contrary, itself involves the application of the method. Hence it is that bad reasoning as well as good reasoning is possible; and this fact is the foundation of the practical side of logic” (CP 5.385).
* “It is not to be supposed,” however, “that the first three methods of settling opinion present no advantage whatever over the scientific method. On the contrary, each has some peculiar convenience of its own” (CP 5.385).
* “The *a priori* method is distinguished for its comfortable conclusions. It is the nature of the process to adopt whatever belief we are inclined to, and there are certain flatteries to the vanity of man which we all believe by nature, until we are awakened from our pleasing dream by rough facts” (CP 5.385).
* “The method of authority will always govern the mass of mankind; and those who wield the various forms of organized force in the state will never be convinced that dangerous reasoning ought not to be suppressed in some way... following the method of authority is the path of peace… The peaceful and sympathetic man will, therefore, find it hard to resist the temptation to submit his opinions to authority” (CP 3.86).
* “But most of all I admire the method of tenacity for its strength, simplicity, and directness. Men who pursue it are distinguished for their decision of character, which becomes very easy with such a mental rule. They do not waste time in trying to make up their minds what they want, but, fastening like lightning upon whatever alternative comes first, they hold to it to the end, whatever happens, without an instant's irresolution. This is one of the splendid qualities which generally accompany brilliant, unlasting success. It is impossible not to envy the man who can dismiss reason, although we know how it must turn out at last” (CP 5.387)
* “Whatever may be the advantages of these other methods, however, a person “should consider that, after all, he wishes his opinions to coincide with the fact, and that there is no reason why the results of those three first methods should do so. To bring about this effect is the prerogative of the method of science” (CP 5.387).
* According to Thompson, Peirce’s account of the four methods suggests a historical progression; the method of tenacity is the most primitive; the method of authority displays a an advance, and by its attempt to achieve unanimity it tries to overcome the chief defect of the first method; the *a priori* method, in turn, by its appeal to “natural preferences” in all people to accept what is apparently reasonable counteracts restriction to the arbitrary authority of a finite community (Thompson, 77).
* All three of these prescientific methods display belief from the standpoint of an individual; the scientific method, in contrast, is more comprehensive, and displays a belief fixation that is arrived at via the community (Thompson, 77).
* Peirce’s well known essay, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” contains his first explicit formulation of pragmatism.
  + In said essay, Peirce argues that in order to successfully advance science, one must first have a clear conception of the idea under discussion, as the presence of exact ideas within the mind is an indispensable prerequisite for scientific inquiry (Thompson, 79)
  + Peirce innovates a new kind of clarity, what he refers to as a third grade, necessary for the scientific method, in which it is maintained that “the production of belief is the sole function of thought” (CP 5.398)
  + For since “the essence of belief is the establishment of habit,” and “different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise” (CP 5.398), in order to develop the meaning of a concept it is only necessary to determine “what habits it produces” (CP 5.400).
  + That is, “what a thing means is simply what habits it involves” (CP 5.401). “Thus our action has exclusive reference to what affects the senses, our habit has the same bearing as our action, our belief the same as our habit, our conception the same as our belief,” and hence, “our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects” (CP 5.401).
  + “It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: 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” (CP 5.402).
  + The above quote is the first instantiation of what Peirce would later call his “pragmatic maxim,” which highlights the emphasis placed on the practical character of all genuine thinking, and the idea that we must evaluate truth on its ability to cohere with the results (Talisse and Aikin, 61).
* In view of such, Peirce is here advocating that an abstract formula has meaning if, and only if, we can use it – or can act under its influence in a unique and apropos way (de Waal, 25).
* For Peirce, two or more things differ practically in so far as we find ourselves constrained in the course of experience to treat them differently, which involves anticipating different reactions from them, and thereupon planning to react to them again with suitable differences in our turn (Gallie, 15).
* The pragmatists’ maxim bids us to say that a given word means its distinctive object only through communicating a distinctive method of action and adjustment with regard to that object (Gallie, 15).
* If, Peirce writes, “you look into a textbook of chemistry for a definition if *lithium*, you may be told that it is that element whose atomic weight is 7 very nearly. But if the author has a more logical mind he will tell you that if you search among minerals that are vitreous, translucent, grey or white, very hard, brittle, and insoluble, for one which imparts a crimson tinge to an unluminous [sic] flame, this mineral being triturated with lime or witherite [sic] rats-bane, and then fused, can be partly dissolved in muriatic acid; and if this solution be evaporated, and the residue be extracted with sulphuric [sic] acid, and duly purified, it can be converted by ordinary methods into a chloride, which being obtained in the solid state, fused, and electrolyzed with half a dozen powerful cells, will yield a globule of a pinkish silvery metal that will float on gasoline [sic]; and the material of that is a specimen of lithium. The peculiarity of this definition - or rather this precept that is more serviceable than a definition – is that it tells you what ‘lithium’ denotes by prescribing what you are to do in order to gain a perceptual acquaintance with the object of the word”(CP 2.330).
* Gallie accesses the broad character and purpose of Peirce’s maxim, and notes that, in the first place, it is an instrument of logical clarification and analysis, as its aim is to help us distinguish as clearly as possible the different functions of different verbal and other symbolic expressions; in the second place, it is clearly a product of a mind “saturated through and through with the spirit of the physical sciences” (CP 1.3) (Gallie, 18).
* As such, no word, symbol, or conception has any meaning whatsoever, save in relation to physical actions, be they real or imagined.
* The general conception of human knowledge that underlies Peirce’s maxim is an experimentalist one.
* Peirce’s pragmatism owes it originality not to what he saw in the laboratory, for others could have very well duplicated such easily; instead, his originality was owed to the framework of general philosophical ideas that he brought to bear on what he did and saw in the laboratory.
* Peirce’s pragmatism selected certain features of experimental science for generalization: the features that it selects are capable of suggesting a body of generalizations which hold true of other forms of human knowledge, such as mathematics, history, metaphysical speculation, and everyday practical judgments of fact (Gallie, 19).
* Some of Peirce’s statements would delight the early twentieth century Logical Positivists in that he claims that pragmatism has the effect of showing that “almost every proposition of ontological metaphysics is… meaningless gibberish – one word being defined by other words, and they by still others, without any real conception ever being reached” (CP 5.423); on the other hand, Peirce throughout his career maintained that it was possible to develop, and he in fact tried to contribute to, a “purified metaphysics” (CP 5.423)
* Peirce’s pragmatism is a method of logic, suggested partly by the method of science and partly by mathematics, but all scientific work, according to him, embodies an unconscious pragmatism (Talisse and Aiken, 11).
* Due to the fact that Peirce’s friends and colleagues, such as William James and John Dewey, adapted the word pragmatism in ways that Peirce himself did not appreciate or agree with, he, in the early 1890’s, chose a new title for his theory, opting for pragmaticism instead, noting that this coinage should be “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” (CP 5.414).
* A weakness, for example, of James’ conception of pragmatism was that it was unnecessarily individualistic; Peirce, in contrast, emphasizes continually that “It is not ‘my’ experience but ‘our’ experience that has to be thought of” in the derivation of truth (CP 5.402).
* In order to truly distinguish Peirce’s mode of pragmatism from other modes of pragmatism and other theories of knowledge in general, specifically Descartes, it is useful to discuss Descartes conception of Intuition as a fundamental activity of the mind, his certain rules of method which are required by this conception of intuition, and the kinds of fact or object that can be known most completely according to Descartes (Eames, 82); Peirce criticizes each of Descartes ideas, which we shall elucidate later.
* Descartes account of intuition may be set out in three successive stages as follows:
  + Every intuition is of an essentially self-evident truth, such that one only has to understand the meaning of the words employed in order to perceive that it must be true
  + Every intuition, in virtue of the first point above, must be a simple two-term relation between knowing mind and known fact; it is as though the fact in question were waiting, ready to reveal itself to the “natural light.”
  + Certain preliminaries must be gone through before we actually achieve a particular intuition, but once it is achieved it is not dependent on any other thought.
    - Of these three stages of intuition, Descartes lays the most emphasis on the first one
* For 200 years, roughly, since Descartes promulgated his understanding of intuition until Peirce, the notion had gone virtually unchallenged;
  + Peirce first examines the allegedly privileged status of the knowledge that each person has of himself as a unique “thinking subject”.
  + Such knowledge, it is claimed often, is intuitive; but the case for this claim is not proven (Gallie, 66).
* In *The Fixation of Belief* (1878), Peirce gives careful elucidation to the words ‘belief’, ‘doubt’, ‘thought’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘experience’; moreover, he introduces the word ‘inquiry’.
  + ‘Belief’ is the natural, or most common, state of the mind; it may be defined as ‘the establishment of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit’ (CP5.398).
  + ‘While belief lasts, it is a strong habit, and as such, forces a man to believe until surprise breaks up the habit’ (CP 5.524).
  + The struggle to alleviate the irritation of doubt, which is brought on by the surprising results of experience, Peirce names inquiry (CP 5.375).
  + It is the irritation of doubt which stimulates us to inquire, search, and act (Eames, 64).
* Peirce mentions three methods of fixing belief, which are enumerated as follows:
  + The method of tenacity
  + The method of authority
  + The *a priori* method
    - None of these methods, however, prove sufficient.
    - The only sufficient method of fixing belief is what Peirce refers to as the method of science (CP 5.589).
* Though at all levels, the perceptual, the inquisitive, the deliberate, the scientific, for Peirce, displays the same pattern in that it is a mutual interplay of the three types of inferences (deduction, induction, and abduction [i.e., hypothesis] Eames, 95).
  + Indeed, Peirce’s pragmatism requires, as a logical rule for judging the admissibility of *hypotheses* that there can be *deduced* from it consequences that can be tested *inductively*.
  + Abduction suggests that something *may* be; deduction shows that something *must* be; and induction shows that something *is* (de Waal, 44).
* Pragmatism positive epistemological trajectory is posited based on the following three theses about knowledge:
  + Antifoundationalism: knowledge neither has nor requires foundations.
  + Fallibilism: all beliefs are subject to revision.
  + And Instrumentalism: knowledge depends on one’s interests (Talisse and Aikin, 39).
    - “[K]nowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not at all once” (Sellars, 79).
* The pragmatic determination of meaning regards an idea as mediating between a person and his environment and places in a triadic relation a person, his environment, and the beliefs according to which he acts (Thompson, 81).
* Peirce offers herein a “metaphysical theory of existence for universal acceptance among those who employ the scientific method of fixing belief” (CP 5.410).

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