

## NOTES ON CHARLES PEIRCE AND WILLIAM JAMES

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**Abstract:** *This article offers a condensed theoretical foray into the philosophical ideas of Charles Peirce and William James by highlighting some of the main developments and conceptual changes brought about by one of the most important modern philosophical movements, i.e. pragmatism.*

**Key words:** *pragmatism; idea; education; function; practicality;*

### Generalities of American Pragmatism and Education

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement developed in the United States which considers both the meaning and the function of philosophical ideas to be determined as functional when they are primarily useful. Developed mostly in America during the latter part of the nineteenth century and during the first part of the twentieth century, pragmatism is usually taken to be a modern version of empiricism. Like all modern philosophical and social movements, it tended to oppose tradition and based its legitimacy on scientific discoveries and methods of science that were taken to show the role of the individual and the environment that defines him in a new light. Two of the major exponents of American pragmatism that this article focuses on are Ch. Peirce and William James.

One of the most important uses of pragmatism (outside philosophy) is to be found in educational theories. The role of pragmatism in educational models (especially the American educational system) is subject to continuous academic research. John Dewey's works in particular continue to be at the forefront of the relationship between pragmatism and education. Whether considered valid or contested, the results of Dewey's work are those of an undoubtedly substantive philosophy that left an important mark across several educational spectrums.

Ties between the American educational system and the American school of pragmatism are identified either at a functional level or are defined from a more general perspective (see Nakinde, 2011). For example, Hao (2017, 378) defines the following generalities pertaining to the effects of pragmatism on education (abbreviated quotation):

**Student-centered Education:** [...] the establishment of the objectives of self-advancement, selection of subjects' autonomous activities and so on/ **Experience Accumulation and Ability Training.** Pragmatic education believes that the real education should be a process of experience accumulation and reorganization, but not a simple system of book studying/ **Committed to Providing Highly Competent People to the Society.** Pragmatism emphasizes efficacy, so the ultimate objective of pragmatic education is to transport “useful” people to the society. / **Impact on American Students and Society.** Undoubtedly pragmatic education improves students' independence, creativity, imagination, and manipulative ability; however, it also has brought many problems to the students and society. First, pragmatic education's overstress of the dominant role of student in study leads to the fact that students are not as assiduous as before.

This article offers a succinct overview of the main concepts developed by two of the most important figures of American pragmatism - Ch. Peirce and William James - in an attempt to offer a more complete perspective on pragmatism, beyond the educational ideas

and commentaries found in the works of the aforementioned authors. (For the latter, extensively covered subject, see for example Plowright David, *Charles Sanders Peirce: Pragmatism and Education*, 2016 and Podeski Ronald, *William James and Education*, 1976). In doing so, this article aims to highlight some of the more complex and original philosophical ideas that defined American pragmatism.

### Charles Peirce

In short, my view is the true one, a young man wants a physical education and an aesthetic education, an education in the ways of the world and a moral education, and with all these logic has nothing in particular to do; but so far as he wants an intellectual education, it is precisely logic that he wants; and whether it be in one lecture room or another, his ultimate purpose is to improve his logical power and his knowledge of methods. To this great end a young man's attention ought to be directed when he first comes to the university; he ought to keep it steadily in view during the whole period of his studies; and finally, he will do well to review his whole work in the light which an education in logic throws upon it. (Peirce 1882, p. 337)

Charles Sanders Peirce is considered the founder of pragmatism, although he changed the name of his philosophical position to "pragmaticism". In the late 19th century he tried to change the direction of pragmatism towards a theory of meaning (as opposed to W. James who understood it as a theory of truth), considering that there is a connection between meaning and action, that the meaning of an idea is to be found in its effects manifested through actions and that humans are generating beliefs through their "habits" of conduct. Although not their primary benefit, true ideas are considered to be useful when they provide order and predictability. Therefore, an idea's base of morality shifted towards the domain of *usefulness*, which in this particular case is generating habits of behavior.

Peirce regarded pragmatism as a method to clarify notions considered to be already established by the philosophical tradition. The fundamental principle of pragmatism in Peirce's vision is that the meaning of an idea is best established by putting it through an experimental test and then observing the results. He focused his attention especially on methodological procedures, as available in sciences, thus exchanging the traditional path with a modern method. He considered that the testing of a certain hypotheses through "laboratory" experimentation will end up in producing a clear type of experience which could be defined through the process of testing and, additionally, it could maintain its logical meaning<sup>9</sup>.

Peirce considered that one cannot be sure of a certain belief, that any truth was provisional and non definitive, since in any proposition a coefficient of probability must be taken into account. This theory, called by Peirce *fallibilism* should not be confused with skepticism; skepticism is a type of questioning; *fallibilism* is a provisional belief, one upon which one is prepared to act.

Peirce's pragmatism, ultimately a logical theory, interprets thought in terms of operation and control, and acknowledges an inseparable connection between rational *knowing* and rational *use*. The whole function of thinking is viewed as one step in the production of what is defined as "habits" of conduct. More to the point, "for Peirce, the law of reason is the

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<sup>9</sup> Peirce developed a criterion of meaning in terms of consequences and a view on beliefs defined as *habits of conduct*. His interests however were not limited to philosophy; his areas of interest extended to logic, epistemology, scientific method, cosmology, and semiotics.

basis for regularities or habits. It is subject to both modification and growth. It demands not exact conformity; it does not freeze further modifications of habit” (Velasco, 1978: 15).

### **William James**

The words of a poem, the formulas of trigonometry, the facts of history, the properties of material things, are all known to us as definite systems or groups of objects which cohere in an order fixed by innumerable interactions, of which anyone part reminds us of the others (James, 1883: 66-67).

William James is generally considered to be one of the most influential American philosophers. He graduated from Harvard, obtaining a medical school diploma, and in 1879 began teaching philosophy after working for two years as an instructor of anatomy at Harvard University. His major influences during his formative years were the works of Mill, Bain, Renouvier and most importantly Henri Bergson, whom he knew personally and whose works played an important role during his later years. **Principles of Psychology** (1890) was his first book available to the public, and was considered to have set new directions in this particular field of science.

James dealt with moral, epistemological, and metaphysical problems in a particular way, opposing immediate experience to intellectual idealism. James' philosophy maintains the plurality of realities (which, according to him, experience consists of), against any balancing or simplifying singularity. Pragmatism, as James defines it, has become a pivotal notion in modern thinking. James developed a view, according to which consciousness functions in an active way to relate and organize thoughts, giving them continuity. In psychology, James' theory is called functionalism, and there are clear lines that unite his psychological observations to his philosophical system.

James furthered his theory of pragmatism in books such as **Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking** (1907) and **The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism** (1909). He described pragmatism as a method for analyzing philosophic problems as well as a theory of truth. He has turned away from abstract theories and fixed, immutable principles, emphasizing the importance of facts and relative principles. James considered philosophies (thus denying an absolute and complete system able to answer all questions) to be mere terminologies of personal temperament, developed a correlation between "tough-minded" and "tender-minded" temperaments (*The Meaning of Truth*) and imposed empiricist and rationalist positions in philosophy. Theories, in James's vision, are nothing else but "instruments" used by individuals to solve problems and should be judged in terms of practical costs for the human conduct. An idea's or action's morality, as well as truth, should be judged, according to James, in a way which evaluates its outcome in human experiences.

In **A Pluralistic Universe** (1909) and **Essays in Radical Empiricism** (1912), James developed and underlined his metaphysical position: there is no fixed external world to be discovered by the mind of the individual in search for higher grounds, but instead there is a so called "blooming-buzzing confusion" that one defines through experience. In this case experience is the only factor that has potential for restructuring the world by giving it an organized and harmonious structure.

James believed that the possession of truth is not a means in itself but a preliminary way to satisfaction. Knowledge is no longer described by the traditional "how it is built?" but becomes "how can I make it?"; an instrument existing as a practical utility. True ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify, *i.e.* ideas or beliefs are useful and truth happens to an idea and reality is a process that has not got a defined space; it is growing where the mind discovers new territories.

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