

Chapter 15

Who's afraid of pragmatism?

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“Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other being right”.

William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.

The Uses of Pragmatism

The essays in *The Power of Pragmatism* draw on the canon of first generation Pragmatist thinkers, primarily John Dewey, alongside William James and George Herbert Mead, as well as on Richard Rorty's more recent iconoclastic anti-representational pragmatist revivalism. One might ask, however, in what respects the problems addressed by this philosophical tradition are the same problems faced by practicing social scientists today. With this question in mind, it is worth looking at how *The Power of Pragmatism* throws light on the problems faced by social scientists that pragmatism, with a big P, appears able to resolve. There are, it seems, at least three areas in which Pragmatism is thought to be able make some practical difference to social research.

The first of these areas concerns the repository of concepts that Pragmatism offers to social scientists. Dewey's account of habitual qualities of human action (Chapter 2), and the centrality of the notion of the situation to Dewey's account of inquiry (Chapter 3), and the recovery and application of Mead's account of the inter-subjective dimensions of self-formation (Chapter 4), all demonstrate how Pragmatism remains a source for innovative concepts that challenge and extend contemporary debates about embodiment, conduct and action. What emerges across the discussion of these foundational Pragmatist concepts is what one might call a broadly *environmental* imagination, if by that is understood a concern with placing aspects of human life which are often theorised in atomistic

ways in a holistic network of interactive (or, in Deweyan terms, 'transactional') relationships. The importance of attending to the milieu in which human life unfolds is demonstrated throughout this collection: in the focus on the emplacement of action in urban worlds (e.g. Chapter 4, Chapter 5, Chapter 8); in ecological spaces (Chapter 10, Chapter 11); in mediated networks of communication (Chapter 3); in situated spaces of learning (e.g. Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 9); and in networks of professional expertise (Chapter 12, Chapter 13).

The second theme running across *The Power of Pragmatism* is a political imperative, reflected in discussions of various methodologies of assertively engaged and experimental social research (e.g. Chapter 5, Chapter 9, Chapter 11). The consistent emphasis is upon not treating people as mere data points, but as active participants in a work of collective inquiry. It is this inclusive ethos that is also taken to be central to the democratic credentials of Pragmatism (e.g. Chapter 2, Chapter 9, Chapter 13). Of course, Pragmatism is not the only tradition of thought that informs practices of research that approach people as the active subjects of their own lives - a hermeneutic imagination is, after all, foundational to social science since Max Weber. And this raises the question of whether contemporary social science actually needs the kind of strictly philosophical warrant provided by Pragmatism. And in asking this question, it is helpful to notice two distinct challenges facing champions of the relevance of big-P Pragmatism to social science.

The first is the challenge of distinguishing Pragmatism from markedly different traditions of thought in a way that really matters to social science. It is not as if modern social science has ever been committed to the Platonic ideals of Truth that Pragmatism is quite good at puncturing. As it is actually practised, social science is not besotted with the Cartesian quest for certain foundations and nor does it hold to a spectator theory of knowledge. Like the rest of science, it is shaped by a fallibilistic commitment to learning through error. The second challenge is that of identifying what is genuinely distinctive or original about avowedly Pragmatist approaches in contrast to other traditions of thought that also hold to what might be called small-P pragmatist themes, such as an inter-

subjective account of the self, or the priority of practice in warranting knowledge claims (it was Marx, for example, who asserted the practical ‘this-sidedness’ of matters of truth).

These two challenges are at the core of the third recurring theme running through *The Power of Pragmatism*, which is the status of claims to knowledge in social science research. This issue is discussed at length in the editors’ Introduction, and it also runs through chapters discussing, for example, the nature of the practical knowledges deployed in planning practices (Chapter 12), development initiatives (Chapter 13), educational contexts (Chapters 6, 7 and 9), as well as discussions of post-truth media publics (Chapter 7). Perhaps the fundamental question for any critical engagement with Pragmatism in social science is whether this tradition warrants the jettisoning of epistemological concerns completely (the perspective most often supported via an appeal to Rorty’s neo-pragmatism), or whether it recasts epistemological questions – including questions of truth – in more modest ways. When looked at in the round, debates in contemporary Pragmatist philosophy suggest that the problem of *getting things right* remains the central concern of this tradition (see Misak 2013).

The emphasis in Pragmatism on the practical relevance of knowledge runs the risk of substituting urgent assertions of political relevance or claims of democratic inclusivity for the task of thinking through difficult epistemological questions. One of the more important contributions of Pragmatism is to reorient epistemological discussions of knowledge and truth around normative issues of appraisal, evaluation, and judgment, and to do so without reducing the former to the latter (there might, after all, be quite a lot of knowledge involved in being good, virtuous, in living well). So, while it is easy to think that Pragmatism affirms that truth is just ‘what is good in the way of belief’, this simple sounding maxim is not meant to solve anything. Rather, it opens up the problem of criteria. And this problem is not simply a matter of arriving at an agreed set of criteria against which one might judge the value (not utility, surely) of knowledge claims. It is a matter of slowing down and thinking about how criteria work (Cavell 1979).

Living Pragmatism

There is now a well-established narrative around Pragmatism, most explicitly articulated in Louis Menand's (2001) collective biography of the first generation of thinkers, in which the most important characteristic feature of this tradition of thought is a shared aversion to dogmatism in matters of knowledge, politics, and religious observance. This historical reference point also provides the basis for the interpretation of Pragmatism as a broadly liberal, progressive tradition. But Pragmatism is a living tradition of thought, one that exceeds the classical canon of Dewey, James, and Pierce (Bernstein 2010, Talisse and Aikin 2011). Pragmatism is, also, a contested tradition, with more radical edges (for example, the early work of Cornel West), as well as central philosophical disputes, not least over the validity of Rorty's hegemonic account of pragmatism. And in fundamental respects, the lesson of this living tradition is that classical Pragmatism needs reappraisal and augmentation if it is to act as an aide to understanding contemporary problems facing social inquiry.

The vibrancy of contemporary philosophical debates about Pragmatism raises the question of whether it is, in fact, even possible any longer to delimit Pragmatism as a distinct tradition. After all, if Pragmatism is characterised, as suggested by Hilary Putnam (1995), by the primacy it accords to practice in matters of knowledge and truth, then the question arises of who, amongst influential philosophers whose work circulates in social science, doesn't count as a pragmatist? Was Wittgenstein a pragmatist? What about Heidegger? (Does it matter?) If an emphasis on practice is meant to be its defining feature, Pragmatism loses much of its distinctive shape. Part of the problem arises from the fact that, in academic debates, 'practice' tends to be invoked as a diacritical term, defined in contrast to, and in favour of, some other term, especially Theory. The idea that practice acquires its value by not being 'theoretical' loses some of its gloss once one notices the importance of the idea of abduction in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, the granddaddy figure of American Pragmatism. Abduction, for Peirce, was the first step in any inquiry, and refers to "all the operations

by which theories and conceptions are engendered” (Peirce 1957, 237). Abduction is the imaginative, creative, dimension of inquiry, a kind of educated guesswork that suggests that ‘mere’ theory might be rather more important to Pragmatist inquiry than is often supposed (see Swedberg 2014, 101-106; see also the editors’ Introduction).

A better contrast to make is that between the practical and the technical. This is a crucial distinction in the social theory of Habermas, for example, in which the practical always involves some reference to reasons for action, rather than simply instrumental application. But this is a distinction that interrupts any easy assimilation of critical theory and Pragmatism, precisely because the latter tradition does often seem to hold to rather instrumental ideas about the primacy of practice.

In short, the commitment to the ‘primacy of practice’ only raises the question of how Pragmatism differs from lots of other traditions of social thought. There is a risk of painting too narrow a picture of the world from which resources for thinking practically can be drawn. On the other hand, and more to the point perhaps, practice is not necessarily a very important concept in Pragmatism. It is *experience* that is the central concept, understood not as an attribute of an isolated consciousness squaring off against a passive external world, but as a shared and interactive phenomenon. This observation suggests that we should suspend the simple affirmation of the practical over the theoretical, in order to be better placed to notice what is most distinctive about a broadly small-P pragmatist inflection identifiable in contemporary social theory (see Joas and Knöbl 2004). And perhaps the best way of appreciating what is distinctive about this small-P pragmatism is to examine some of the family resemblances between Pragmatism with a big-P and other streams of modern social thought.

For example, one might note the evident affinity between Dewey’s concern with inquiry as a matter of responding to problematic situations and Michel Foucault’s account of problematisation (Barnett and Bridge 2017, Koopman 2011). Here, what links Pragmatism to Foucault’s work is a common concern with investigating the role that practices of truth play in the world.

One might also recall, again, that there is no more influential source for thinking in terms of the primacy of practice in social science than Marxism. The importance of Marx's emphasis on 'human sensuous activity' is best captured by Merleau-Ponty's (1973, 50) definition of *praxis*, the notion that became so central to strands of dissident Marxist thought in the twentieth-century: "The profound philosophical meaning of the notion of praxis is to place us in an order which is not that of knowledge but rather that of communication, exchange, and association". Here, the point of an emphasis on the practical lies in thinking of issues of cognition and knowing as thoroughly social, historical, and no less prone to objective analysis for all that.

And by way of one final example, the importance of the French tradition of 'pragmatic sociology' lies not simply in preferring the concrete to the abstract, nor even of moving from an individualistic focus to a more collective imagination. It lies in addressing the challenge of acknowledging the irreducible dimension of normativity that defines practices *as* practices (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; see also Rouse 2007).

There are, of course, other connections one can make between big-P pragmatism and other practically oriented approaches to inquiry. But by noting the pragmatist resonances in these three fields, one can begin to glean the outlines of what is most significant about taking a small-P pragmatist approach. First, there is an emphasis on how truth emerges as an issue in relation to *problems* of human coordination, cooperation, and living in common. Second, there is a sense that knowledge is a thoroughly *social* phenomenon, emergent around commonly experienced difficulties. And thirdly, there is a sense that the *normative* capacity to judge, to evaluate, and to give and receive reasons is an irreducible element of practical knowledge.

And this characterisation of small-P pragmatism brings us back to the issue of how to best appreciate the proposition that the truth status of knowledge is warranted by elaborating on the consequences of holding this or that belief. It is, rather, the opening up of a new set of issues. James held that "The true is the name of whatever proves to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite,

assignable reasons" (2000, p. 38). The first part of that proposition is what is most often emphasised in readings of canonical Pragmatism. But it's the second part that is much the most interesting. In thinking through the problem of giving and receiving reasons, to use the terms of Robert Brandom's neo-Analytical pragmatism, when weighing up the consequences of a belief, what is opened up to analysis is a world of *conflicting* interests and possibilities.

The suggestion that what is good in the way of belief is a matter open to reasoned judgment therefore helps address one of the bugbears of any social science treatment of Pragmatism, which is the oft-repeated assertion that Pragmatism does not deal very well with structural forms of power. In fact, power shows up in pragmatism as a concept concerned with capacities to act, rather than in terms of relations of domination – as power-to, rather than power-over (see Allen 2016). One can find this sense of power, for example, in Dewey's (1927) account of public formation, in which the extension of interactions across time and space enhances the collective capacity to address a wider web of issues (see also Chapter 3). This sense of power might not, still, satisfy someone who does not think that relations of domination are important matters of concern. But there is no reason, in principle, why one might not develop an analysis of domination from this prior sense of power as a capacity to act (it is, for example, the concern of James Bohman's pragmatist-inflected democratic theory (see Barnett 2017, 231-236)).

James' reference to the need for reasons in deciding upon what is good in the way of belief to another suggests the implicit sense of conflict lurking within Pragmatism's headline commitment to the pluralism of human activities. Perhaps what is most needed, then, is a more agonistic sense of collective life than one often finds in interpretations of canonical Pragmatism (see Barnett and Bridge 2013). And here it is worth pausing, and acknowledging the limits of Pragmatism's constitutive sense of optimistic confidence – confidence both in rendering old philosophical problematics redundant, and confidence in the capacity of collective action to resolve pressing issues. Stanley Cavell (1988) once charged that neither Dewey nor James took the threat of scepticism seriously, preferring to

dissolve metaphysical 'Cartesian' worries about other minds or knowledge of the external world into the reassuring certainties of collective practice. From Cavell's perspective, dismissing the threat of scepticism as a metaphysical error amounts to a failure to acknowledge the tragic dimensions of human life. A similar sort of charge can be levelled at Mead, who acknowledged the affective dimensions of human action, but worked hard to neutralise the wilder implications of this affirmation (see Leys 1993).

Cavell is resistant to the overly energetic invocation of action and practice in Pragmatism, at the cost of the need for patience and reflection. But what's most at stake in his criticism are two different understandings of experience, that most central of Pragmatist concepts. Pragmatism tends to displace notions of individualist rationality into collective practices. Cavell wants to hold to some aspect of experience that resists full rational articulation, and that therefore remains irreducibly singular and personal (see Donatelli, Frega, and Laugier 2010). And behind this contrast, there is a deeper difference in perspectives on the status of individuality. One reason that Pragmatism appeals to social scientists is precisely because of its critique of individualism. But it might also risk over-socialising the self. Cavell wants to affirm the irreducibility of the self to its conditions of social formation, an affirmation that serves as a source for an ordinary dimension of agonism in human affairs that challenges social scientists' satisfaction in socialising every aspect of human life as well as easy invocations of 'Democracy' as the solution to any and all political conundrum.

The essays in this collection testify to the creative potential of a living tradition of thought. The horizon of future inquiry into the value of big-P Pragmatism and small-p pragmatisms lies in negotiating between overly socialised views of the social (for example, in cultural theories of the social construction of subjectivity or non-representational theories of affective atmospheres) and under-socialised views of the individual (for example, in economics or psychology). Big-P Pragmatism's value lies in part in its emphasis on the social dimensions of knowledge, on how problems arise and resolutions are arrived at through practices of collective interaction. But it is also a

tradition of thought that affirms the irreducible pluralism of human life. And this pluralism, it should be said, is more of a problem than is often acknowledged. It calls for a more serious consideration of sharing as an inherently divisive activity (see Barnett 2016). Taking pluralism seriously involves attending problems of cooperation, coordination, and organisation *as* problems. And this requires giving more attention to the normative practices of evaluation, judgment, and verification through which different ways of proceeding are assessed, warranted, and contested.

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