

The Pragmatic Maxim: How to Get Leverage on a Concept

By Cheryl Misak

1. Introduction

AT THE HEART OF PRAGMATISM IS A MAXIM THAT REQUIRES OUR THEORIES and concepts to be linked to experience and practice. The maxim receives different treatment at the hands of its various proponents. My aim here is to articulate those differences, identify what is important in the pragmatic maxim, and to articulate a version that is not open to the usual attacks. The conclusion will be that we would do best to return for inspiration to the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, rather than his more popular fellow travelers, William James and Richard Rorty.

Along the way, I shall show how the pragmatic maxim plays out when applied to the concept of truth. All pragmatist accounts of truth are naturalist, on which we are prohibited from trying to add anything metaphysical to first-order inquiry. We have to extract the concept of truth, as it were, from our practices of inquiry, reason-giving, and deliberation. But with variations in the kind of pragmatic maxim adopted come variations in the kind of view of truth adopted and, unsurprisingly, we shall see that the most plausible maxim results in the most plausible of the pragmatist accounts of truth.

2. The Verificationist Context

THE FOUNDERS OF PRAGMATISM TOOK THEMSELVES TO BE, FIRST AND FOREMOST, empiricists and verificationists, not of Comte's variety, but of some special new sort. I will not spend any time on the verificationism that preceded pragmatism, but it will be important to see the significant differences between pragmatism, and the verificationism that came after it—the verifiability principle of logical empiricism. As those differences are articulated, a much sharper picture of the various brands of pragmatism and their respective defects and merits will come

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into view.

The verifiability principle had it that all meaningful sentences are reducible to statements that are empirically verifiable. Thus, no question is in principle unanswerable by science. Domains of inquiry can achieve clarity and progress by having their theories symbolized in the language of logic. These deductive axiomatic theories are given empirical meaning by definitions which hook up the primitive terms in the formal language with observables in the world. Philosophy was to get with the program, put its theories in scientific language and render itself clear. Most of the age-old questions and their purported answers would be shown to be fruitless and meaningless, as they will not be reducible, via first-order predicate logic, to observation statements. They are not empirically verifiable; they are pseudo-propositions.

Metaphysics is one of the most obvious casualties of the verifiability criterion. At best, statements about the good, essences, the Absolute, and the thing-in-itself are expressions of an attitude or feeling toward life. Statements about what is right or wrong, for instance, are either (i) statements about what people actually approve of, not what they ought to approve of (that is, ethics is an empirical science); or (ii) they are meaningless; or (iii) they express emotions or feelings. Hence the infamous “Boo-Hurrah” theory of ethics, on which to say that some act is odious is to say “Boo-hiss!” to it and to say that some act is good is to say “Hurrah!”

A.J. Ayer was right to assert that the pragmatic maxim of the classical pragmatists also “allows no truck with metaphysics. Its standpoint is closely akin to that which was later to be adopted by the logical positivists” (1968:45). But he was wrong to think that the maxim is “identical . . . with the physicalist interpretation of the verification principle” (ibid.). For as we shall see below, Peirce, at least, offered a much broader account of experience than the verificationists ever envisioned and he was very clear that he was talking about an aspect of meaningfulness, not the whole of it.

3. William James and the Anything-goes Maxim

WILLIAM JAMES, LIKE THE LOGICAL EMPIRICISTS, HAS HIS MAXIM MAKING SHORT WORK of many long-standing and seemingly intractable metaphysical problems: “If no practical difference whatsoever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle” ([1907] 1949:45). But he parts company from the logical empiricists in a dramatic way when he tells us that the kind of difference he is talking about is any kind of difference to you or to me:

There can be no difference anywhere that does not make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that does not express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be 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 true one ([1907] 1949, Lecture 2).

Whereas the logical empiricists have all hypotheses requiring empirical consequences, James has all hypotheses requiring consequences for my conduct or for your conduct. One wonders whether any hypothesis will make the grade.

When James turns his maxim on the concept of truth, it is unsurprising that the result is rather radical. For James, truth is what works for this or that person. He infamously argued in "The Will to Believe" that if a religious hypothesis has consequences for a believer's life, it is acceptable. Religious hypotheses, like all hypotheses, need to be verified, but the verification in question involves finding out whether the hypothesis has an effect on the believer's life and the matter of the truth of the hypothesis involves finding out whether the hypothesis works nicely for the believer:

If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, "works best"; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses ((1897)[1979]: 8).

One fatal objection to this line of thought is as follows. Of course such evidence (that a belief in God has a positive effect or works nicely for me or for you) is relevant to the question of whether or not religion is good for human beings. But it is not relevant to the question of whether God exists. This was precisely the objection Peirce put to James. He thought that the hypothesis of God's existence was an empirical hypothesis, hence it required empirical consequences.

4. Peirce and Getting a Fix on a Concept

PEIRCE PUBLISHED VERY LITTLE IN HIS STUNTED CAREER. BUT ONE THING THAT HE DID publish was a famous set of early papers (1877-78) in the *Popular Science Monthly* with the general title *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*. One of those papers, "How to Make our Ideas Clear," contains the best-known statement of his pragmatic maxim.

In this article, Peirce identifies pragmatism as a way of clarifying our ideas so that they are not subject to metaphysical "deceptions." Here is that famous, or perhaps infamous, statement:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these is the whole of our conception of the object (W3, 266).

His aim is to "come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference in practice" (W3 265).

In this essay, the effects Peirce identifies as being at the root of our distinctions are characterized as "effects, direct or indirect, upon our senses" (W3 266). As an example, he asks about the meaning of the statement that "this diamond is hard" and finds that it amounts to "it will not be scratched by many other substances" (W3 266). He says, setting up pragmatism for trouble for a century to come: "there is absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test. Suppose, then, that a diamond could be crystallized in the midst of a cushion of soft cotton, and should remain there until it was finally burned up" (W3 267*). His suggestion is that it is meaningless

to speak of such a diamond as being hard.

Given Peirce's minimal public output, it is no wonder that the "How to Make our Ideas Clear" version has stuck in people's minds as the official version. But it is far from his considered view and it is unfortunate that the above snappy summary ("consider what effects . . .") gets repeated so frequently. He tinkered with this published version of the pragmatic maxim for decades afterwards.

He sees, for instance, that the use of the indicative conditional—it will not be scratched—is highly problematic and retracts it. In 1905, for instance, he is adamant that the "will-be" in that formulation be replaced by a "would-be." Of the unscratched diamond, he says that "it is a real fact that it *would* resist pressure" (CP 8.208, 1905).

He also thought hard about the kinds of consequences that counted—over what kinds of things we must expect from our beliefs if they are to be legitimate. He refines his thought that they must be consequences for the senses, broadening his notion of experience to include anything that impinges upon us.

But even in "How to Make our Ideas Clear," it was not obvious that the principle Peirce was articulating was designed to be a semantic principle about the very meaning of our concepts. As the very title of the paper suggests, Peirce took the maxim to be about achieving clarity. He took his contribution to be part of a well-worn debate. Here is the very first sentence of "How to Make our Ideas Clear":

Whoever has looked into a modern treatise on logic of the common sort, will doubtless remember the two distinctions between *clear* and *obscure* conceptions, and between *distinct* and *confused* conceptions. They have lain in the books now for nigh two centuries, unimproved and unmodified, and are generally reckoned by logicians as among the gems of their doctrine (W3 265*).

"The books," he says, "are right in making familiarity with a notion the first step toward clearness of apprehension, and the defining of it the second" (W3 260). But he wants to add an important third "grade of clearness" or grade of "apprehensions of the meanings of words."

That is, his contribution to the debate is to add what he sometimes calls "a far higher grade" of clarity to the standard two. He tries to get us to see the difference between three respectable tasks: (i) providing an analytic definition of a concept, which might be useful to someone who has never encountered the concept before; (ii) knowing how to pick out instances of the concept; and (iii) providing a pragmatic elucidation of it—an account of the role the concept plays in practical endeavors or knowing what to expect if beliefs containing the concept are true or false. If a belief has no consequences—if there is nothing we would expect would be different if it were true or false—then it lacks a dimension we would have had to get right were we to fully understand it.

His interest lies not in definition or denotation but in the third project. He thought that the pragmatic grade of clarity is a higher grade than the other two because it plays a special role in inquiry and deliberation. If a belief has no consequences—if there is nothing we would expect would be different if it were true or false—then it is empty or useless for inquiry and deliberation. The maxim thus determines "the admissibility of hypotheses to rank as hypotheses (MS 318,

p.8, 1907)“ If a belief has no consequences—if there is nothing we would expect would be different if it were true or false—then it is unsuitable for inquiry. There is no point in investigating it because there is no way of investigating it.

Peirce bemoaned the fact that people had taken his slogan in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” to be an expression of the entirety of meaning. He says in 1910 of that essay:

I believe I made my own opinion quite clear to any attentive Reader, that the pragmaticistic grade of clearness could no more supersede the Definitary or Analytic grade than this latter grade could supersede the first. That is to say, if the Maxim of Pragmaticism be acknowledged, although Definition can no longer be regarded as the supreme mode of clear Apprehension; yet it retains all the *absolute* importance it ever had, still remaining indispensable to all Exact Reasoning (MS 647, p.2.).

Of course, this appears in an unpublished manuscript, destined to see the light of day only sometime in the still distant future.

Peirce was so disconcerted by how his maxim was being interpreted that in the early 1900s, he makes the following sea change. The term “pragmatism”

. . . gets abused in the merciless way that words have to expect when they fall into literary clutches. . . . So then, the writer, finding his bantling “pragmatism” so promoted, feels that it is time to kiss his child good-bye and relinquish it to its higher destiny; while to serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he begs to announce the birth of the word “pragmaticism,” which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers (CP 5.414*).

So Peirce’s pragmatic maxim is not a semantic principle about the very meaning of our concepts—it is not designed to capture a full account of meaning. Rather than take that snappy summary provided in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” as capturing Peirce’s intentions, we must focus rather on later, more generous kinds of expressions. These expressions are of the following sort: we “must look to the upshot of our concepts in order to rightly apprehend them” (CP 5.4); in order to get a complete grasp of a concept, we must connect it to that with which we have “dealings” (CP 5.416). Or my favorite:

[W]e must not begin by talking of pure ideas,—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation,—but must begin with men and their conversation (CP 8.112).

David Wiggins gets Peirce’s considered view of the pragmatic maxim exactly right. When a concept is “already fundamental to human thought and long since possessed of an autonomous interest,” it is pointless to try to define it (2002:316). Rather, we ought to attempt to get leverage on the concept, or a fix on it, by exploring its connections with practice. This is the insight at the heart of pragmatism. This less severe principle of course is less precise. But it is also less wrong and, in the end, it is much more helpful.

5. Peirce’s Pragmatic Account of Truth

IT IS EASY TO SEE THAT THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH IS ONE OF THOSE CONCEPTS, FUNDAMENTAL to human thought, in which we have a long-standing autonomous interest. Hence

Peirce thinks that it can be illuminated by looking at our practices of doubt, belief, inquiry and assertion, for those are the human dealings relevant to truth. When we assert, believe, or inquire, we take ourselves to be aiming at truth. We want to know, for instance, what methods might get us true belief; whether it is worth our time and energy to inquire into certain kinds of questions; whether a discourse such as moral discourse aims at truth or whether it is a radically subjective matter, not at all suited for truth-value.

When Peirce turns his maxim on the concept of truth, the upshot is an aversion to “transcendental” accounts of truth, such as the correspondence theory, on which a true belief is one that gets right or mirrors the believer-independent world (CP 5.572). Such accounts of truth are examples of those “vagabond thoughts.” They make truth “the subject of metaphysics exclusively.” For the very idea of the believer-independent world, and the items within it to which beliefs or sentences might correspond, seem graspable only if we could somehow step outside of our corpus of belief, our practices, or that with which we have dealings.

Peirce thinks that the correspondence concept of truth is missing the dimension that makes it suitable for inquiry. But he is perfectly happy with it as a “nominal” definition, useful only to those who have never encountered the word before (CP 8.100*). If we want a more robust or a full account of truth, we need to provide a pragmatic elucidation—an account of the role the concept plays in practical endeavors.

Peirce argues that if we are to bring the concept of truth down to earth from metaphysical flights of fancy, we must see how it engages with our practices of assertion, inquiry, reasons, evidence, and belief. For those are the “dealings” connected to truth. So, for instance, once we see that truth and assertion are intimately connected—once we see that to assert that p is true is to assert p —we can look to our practices of assertion to see what commitments they entail. As Wiggins (2004) puts it, hard on the heels of the thought that truth is internally related to assertion comes the thought that truth is also internally related to inquiry, reasons, evidence, and standards of good belief. If we unpack the commitments we incur when we assert, we find that we have imported all these notions.

Peirce argues that when we think of how truth engages with our practices, we shall see that we need to think of a true belief as the very best that inquiry could do—a belief that would be “indefeasible”; or would not be improved upon; or would never lead to disappointment; or would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence. A true belief is a belief we would come to, were we to inquire as far as we could on a matter.

He initially put this idea in the following unhelpful way: a true belief would be agreed upon at the hypothetical or “fated” end of inquiry (See W3:273). But his considered and much better formulations are the ones above. A true belief would withstand doubt, were we to inquire as far as we fruitfully could into the matter. On the whole, he tries to stay away from unhelpful ideas such as the final end of inquiry, perfect evidence, and the like.

This is not to say that truth has now been *identified* as that which satisfies our aims in assertion and inquiry. We must be careful to not take these

elucidations of truth to be attempts at analytic definition. Nothing could be clearer than Peirce's intention to avoid that. A dispute about definition, he says, is usually a "profitless discussion" (CP 8.100).

Again, Wiggins sees the point clearly: "To elucidate truth in its relations with the notion of inquiry, for instance, as the pragmatist does, need not . . . represent any concession at all to the idea that truth is *itself* an "epistemic notion" (2002:318). Once we see that the concepts of assertion, inquiry, and truth live in the same conceptual neighborhood, we can get a grip on the concept of truth by exploring the connections between it and its neighbors. This will not be an analysis of the essence of truth, but a way of getting clearer about what truth is.

One way of describing this project is to say that Peirce deflates the idea of truth by linking it to belief, assertion, experience, and inquiry. What we do when we offer a justification of "*p* is true" is to offer a justification for the claim that *p*. There is an unseverable connection between making an assertion and claiming that it is true. If we want to know whether it is true that Toronto is north of Buffalo, there is nothing additional to check on ("a fact," "a state of affairs")—nothing over and above our consulting maps, driving or walking north from Buffalo to see whether we get to Toronto, et cetera. The question of the *truth* of the statement does not involve anything more than investigating the matter in our usual ways. For a claim's fitting and continuing to fit with all the evidence and argument is all we can be interested in. Our attention must be on first-order inquiry into the claim itself, not on "philosophical" inquiry into the nature of truth. For the best kind of philosophical inquiry into the nature of truth draws out the connection between truth and the satisfaction of our aims in first-order assertion and inquiry.

6. The Kinds of Consequences Required by Peirce's Maxim

WE HAVE SEEN THAT PEIRCE THOUGHT THAT THE PRAGMATIC GRADE OF CLARITY PLAYS a special role in inquiry. If a belief has no consequences—if there is nothing we would expect would be different if it were true or false—then it lacks a dimension we would have had to get right were we to fully understand it. And without that dimension, it is empty or useless for inquiry and deliberation.

Peirce worried over what kinds of consequences counted—over what kinds of things we must expect from our beliefs, if they are to be legitimate. In "How to Make our Ideas Clear" he suggests that they must be consequences, "direct or indirect" for the senses.

But on reflection, he was not interested in narrowing the scope of the legitimate so severely. He thought, for instance, that some metaphysical inquiry was perfectly acceptable. In metaphysics, "one finds those questions that at first seem to offer no handle for reason's clutch, but which readily yield to logical analysis" (CP 6.463, 1908). Metaphysics, "in its present condition" is a "puny, rickety, and scrofulous science," but it need not remain so. It is up to the pragmatic maxim to sweep "all metaphysical rubbish out of one's house. Each abstraction is either pronounced gibberish or is provided with a plain, practical definition" (CP 8.191, 1904).

This sounds reminiscent of logical empiricism. But from the early 1900s on, Peirce tried to divert the focus from sensory experience and direct it to a broader notion of experience that would have been anathema to the logical

empiricists.

Experience, for Peirce, is that which is compelling, surprising, unchosen, brute, involuntary, or forceful:

[A]nything is . . . to be classed under the species of perception wherein a positive qualitative content is forced upon one's acknowledgement without any reason or pretension to reason. There will be a wider genus of things *partaking* of the character of perception, if there be any matter of cognition which exerts a force upon us . . . (CP 7.623).

This extremely broad conception of experience is clearly going to allow for a criterion of legitimacy that allows not only beliefs which are directly verifiable by the senses.

Peirce makes no claim that reports of experience are accounts of the experiencer's own states—a kind of introspection about which the experiencer cannot be mistaken. Nothing is implied, that is, about being given something pure or unadulterated. As Dorothy Emmet so nicely put it: there is a difference between being brute and stubborn on the one hand and being bare and naked on the other (1994:186). Experience is the tribunal against which beliefs are tested, but it does not give us access to a truth unclothed by human cognitive capacities and interests. That fallibilism and aversion to the "Given" is an essential platform of any pragmatist's epistemology.

What then becomes of the authority of experience? We clearly have no recourse to the idea that the authority of experience comes via its incorrigibility. This is a good thing, as the lesson learned by the logical empiricists was that "blue, here, now" was certainly or infallibly true only if it was taken as a judgment about what *seems to me* to be the case. But of course, they were interested in what *is* the case—they were interested in truth about the world, not in truth about their own mental states. Even they eventually saw that the authority of experience is a fallible one.

On the Peircean conception of experience under consideration here, our experiential judgments are authoritative in that we have no choice but to pay attention to them. They arrive uncritically and then we subject them to reason and scrutiny. When we are careful in evaluating our experiential judgments, they tend not to lead us astray and hence our taking them seriously seems wise as well as necessary.

So unlike the logical empiricists, Peirce was not interested in narrowing the scope of the legitimate to the empirical sciences. But like them, he was concerned to set out some principles that would indeed allow one to distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate.

His treatment of mathematical and logical beliefs is the most interesting example of what he was trying to achieve. The history of empiricism is littered with attempts to show how these statements, although not obviously connected to experience, are nonetheless legitimate. Most of those attempts (think of Hume and the logical empiricists) trade on the idea that mathematics and logic are somehow exempt from the rigors of the empiricist criterion. But Peirce joins Mill and Quine in the project of treating mathematics and logic as a whole with the rest of genuine inquiry.

He argued that mathematical and logical hypotheses are indeed connected to experience in the requisite way. They meet the requirement set out in the pragmatic maxim: we expect certain things to be the case if they are true. Not only might we have practical or applied or bridge-building expectations about mathematics, but even hypotheses in pure mathematics have consequences. They have consequences, Peirce argued, in diagrammatic contexts. Diagrams provide us with a forum for matters to impinge upon us.

Peirce put considerable effort into trying to get this thought right. (Indeed, Peirce developed as first-order quantified logic based with a diagrammatic proof system just as Frege was developing his own such logic.) In 1905, he suggests that there are two kinds of experience: ideal and real. The latter is sensory experience and the former is experience in which “operations on diagrams, whether external or imaginary, take the place of the experiments upon real things that one performs in chemical and physical research” (CP 4.530, 1905). But already in 1872, this idea had a central place in his thought. Mathematical and logical inquiry

... involves an element of observation; namely, [it] consists in constructing an icon or diagram the relation of whose parts shall present a complete analogy with those of the parts of the object of reasoning, of experimenting upon this image in the imagination, and of observing the result so as to discover unnoticed and hidden relations among the parts (W3, 41).

The mathematician’s “hypotheses are creatures of his own imagination; but he discovers in them relations which surprise him sometimes” (CP 5.567, 1901). This surprise is the force of experience. When we manipulate diagrams, we can find ourselves surprised.

Sometimes he distinguishes the two kinds of experience by saying that everyone inhabits two worlds: the inner (or the ideal) and the outer (or the real). We react with the outer world through a clash between it and our senses. We react with the inner world by performing thought experiments. Inquiry, he says, has

... two branches; one is inquiry into Outward Fact by experimentation and observation, and is called *Inductive Investigation*; the other is inquiry into Inner Truth by inward experimentation and observation and is called *Mathematical* or *Deductive Reasoning* (MS 408, p.150).

The distinction between these two kinds of experience and two kinds of inquiry is not, however, hard and fast. External facts are simply those which are “ordinarily regarded as external while others are regarded as internal” (W2 205, 1868). The inner world exerts a comparatively slight compulsion upon us, whereas the outer world is full of irresistible compulsions. Nonetheless, the inner world can also be “unreasonably compulsory” and have “its surprises for us” (CP 7.438, 1893). Peirce intends to leave the difference between these two kinds of experience vague: “we naturally make all our distinctions too absolute. We are accustomed to speak of an external universe and an inner world of thought. But they are merely vicinities, with no real boundary between them” (CP 7. 438, 1893).

There is a lot of work to be done to get this thought right. But I suggest that it indicates to us a way forward in developing a empiricist criterion of legitimacy that sidesteps the objections to the verifiability criterion (that it made

meaningless much of what was important in life; that it was so narrow that it ruled out much of science itself).

One thing that needs attention is the matter of saying just which kinds of inner experiences count and which do not. Peirce struggled mightily with this problem and it would be silly to say that he got it right. But one thing is clear. He thought that James got it wrong.

One way of stating the problem is as follows. The empiricist who is willing to broaden the notion of experience to include non-sensory experience needs to say whether the consequences in question are consequences for belief or consequences for the world. James took the former line, saying that the pragmatic maxim ought to “be expressed more broadly than Mr. Peirce expresses it” (James 1898:124).

James infamously argued in “The Will to Believe” that if a religious hypothesis has consequences for a believer’s life, it is acceptable. Religious hypotheses, like all hypotheses, need to be verified. But the verification in question involves finding out only what works best for the “active faiths” or the lives of the believers.

The objection to this line of thought is that such evidence may be relevant to the question of whether or not religion is good for human beings, but not relevant to the question of whether God exists. This is the very objection that Peirce ended up putting to James. *The Will to Believe* is dedicated “To My Old Friend, Charles Sanders Peirce, To whose philosophic comradeship in old times and to whose writings in more recent years I owe more incitement and help than I can express or repay.” Peirce was touched, but nonetheless, he does not have much good to say about James’ essay. He tells James in a 1909 letter: “I thought your *Will to Believe* was a very exaggerated utterance, such as injures a serious man very much . . .” (CL 12: 171). James’s view amounts to: “Oh, I could not believe so-and-so, because I should be wretched if I did” (5.377*).

Peirce’s own attempt at “tracing out a few consequences of the hypothesis” of God’s reality is found in his “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God.” Between 1905 and 1908, he struggled with drafts of this essay, never coming to a view that was satisfactory. The attempt, however, distinguishes him very clearly from James. Peirce notes, echoing James, that the belief in God has “a commanding influence over the whole conduct of life of its believers” (CP 6.490). But Peirce does not take James’s path and argue that these commanding influences—these consequences for the lives of believers—are the sorts of consequences that can speak to the legitimacy of the belief. For Peirce sees that hypotheses about God’s existence are hypotheses about the world. Hence they need empirical verification of the usual sort.

We have seen that he thought that the hypotheses of mathematics and logic, in contrast, are about the “ideal world” and they require verification in diagrammatic contexts. He thought less about the role of ethics, but I have argued that he was also in principle willing to consider that ethics might be a legitimate domain of deliberation and inquiry. My own attempt at making that work for him will be discussed tomorrow by Henry Richardson.

7. Conclusion: Where Pragmatism is Now

THE PRAGMATIC MAXIM HAS IT THAT WE MUST BE ABLE TO EXPECT SOMETHING OF A

hypothesis. We have seen that this thought manifests itself rather differently in the work of the two founders of pragmatism. James adopts a pragmatic maxim on which we must expect that a hypothesis would have an effect on my or your or someone's beliefs. Pretty much anything might meet this test. When James applies the maxim to the concept of truth, he arrives at the same kind of radically liberal view. Truth is whatever works for an inquirer and hence pretty much anything might meet the test.

Peirce, on the other hand, comes to a much more nuanced requirement, on which a hypothesis about the external world must have, if legitimate, effects on the world and a hypothesis about (let's call it) the non-external world must have different sorts of effects. This criterion is not such that any hypothesis can meet it, but it is less restrictive than the verifiability criterion of the logical empiricists.

Unfortunately, the inheritors of James are seen now to carry the pragmatist banner. Richard Rorty is of course the most famous of them. His version of the pragmatic maxim is that our concepts cannot outrun our practices or our current and ongoing "conversations" in which we must form our beliefs, make our decisions, and live our lives:

There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions (1982: xlii).

Similarly, his versions of the pragmatist theory of truth "tend to center" around those of James (Rorty 1995:71). Rorty's argument is that there is no practical difference between aiming to hold true beliefs and aiming to hold justified beliefs, and hence it makes no sense to speak of truth as a goal of inquiry. The inquirer cannot compare her beliefs with reality — she can only try to live up to her epistemic responsibilities or the standards of her epistemic community. The yearning for an unconditional, impossible, indefinable, sublime thing like truth comes at the price of "irrelevance to practice" (2000:2). So far, even the best kind of pragmatist can agree.

But Rorty goes on to maintain that truth is simply solidarity, or what we have come to take as true, or what our peers will let us get away with saying (1979:176). We must "substitute the idea of "unforced agreement" for that of "objectivity" (1991:38) in every domain of inquiry — science as well as morals and politics (1991:36).

Again, it looks as if the bar is being set very low. Any hypothesis that is agreed upon, any hypothesis that we can get away with asserting, is as good as true.

In 1909, James Pratt nailed the matter on the head. (Jamesian) pragmatism

... seeks to prove the truth of religion by its good and satisfactory consequences. Here, however, a distinction must be made; namely between the "good," harmonious, and logically confirmatory consequences of religious concepts as such, and the good and pleasant consequences which come from believing these concepts. It is one thing to say a belief is true because the logical consequences that flow from it fit in harmoniously with our otherwise grounded knowledge; and quite another to call it true because it is pleasant to believe (1909:186-7).

The difference between the view of Peirce, on the one hand, and the view of James and Rorty, on the other, can be nicely summarized by Pratt's distinction, with one caveat. Peirce holds that "a belief is true because the logical consequences that flow from it fit in harmoniously with our otherwise grounded knowledge" and James and Rorty hold (or at least fail to block the thought) that a belief can be true "because it is pleasant to believe." The caveat is that Peirce insisted on a subjunctive formulation: a belief is true if the logical consequences *would* fit harmoniously with our otherwise grounded knowledge, were we to pursue our investigations as far as they could fruitfully go.

Those who want to argue against pragmatism (and there certainly are arguments to be made against the position) must take on this, and not substandard versions of it. ϕ

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