

Pragmatism as an attitude

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Introduction

What sort of entity are we referring to when we speak of pragmatism as a philosophical doctrine? More often than not pragmatism is associated with its theory – or rather theories – of truth. C. S. Peirce's pragmatic maxim¹ according to which the whole meaning of a concept is captured on the practical bearings the concept might have (Peirce 1878) is often quoted as the starting point of the pragmatic movement and it inspired William James to formulate his famous but dubious argument according to which any idea “which we can ride”, which is useful for our purposes, is “true *instrumentally*” (James 1991:28). This instrumental conception of truth is often taken to be the core of pragmatism. This is especially true of the non-pragmatic philosophers who often are surprisingly unwilling to examine pragmatism anywhere beyond this point.

But there is also another way of viewing pragmatism that does not associate it with any specific theories about truth or the nature of reality but rather with a certain kind of attitude expressed in one's philosophical inquiry. James, Dewey and Schiller² all express opinions according to which they see a certain attitude to be the essential element of pragmatic philosophy. In his lecture on *What pragmatism means* James (1991) primarily speaks of pragmatism as an attitude and as a method for settling philosophical disputes. For him pragmatism is first a method and only secondly “a genetic theory of what is meant by truth” (James 1991:32). And pragmatism as a method means “no particular results” but “only an attitude of orientation” that lies “in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel” (James 1991:27). Whatever specific problems pragmatists are puzzling over or whatever theories they are supporting in their individual hotel rooms they nevertheless must pass

¹ Later Peirce preferred to call it the *pragmaticist* maxim to separate it from the pragmatist school of philosophy that James had started (CP 6.481-482). One should therefore not confuse Peirce to be a supporter of this kind of instrumentalist conception of truth – at least not in any straight-forward sense (see for example Misak 2009).

² In defining pragmatism as an attitude my primary sources throughout this essay are James's (1991) lecture 'What pragmatism means', Dewey's (1908) essay 'What does pragmatism mean by practical?' and Schiller's (1907) chapter 'The definition of pragmatism and humanism'.

through the corridor of pragmatic attitude. According to James then, the attitude – and not any specific theory – is what lies at the core of pragmatism and unites different pragmatists.

This reading of James finds support in Dewey, who takes this attitude, or temper of mind, to be the most essential element of pragmatism for James (Dewey 1908:85). And Dewey himself echoes James' approach in his essay *What does pragmatism mean by practical?* by regarding "pragmatism as primarily a method" and treating "the account of ideas and their truth and of reality somewhat incidentally so far as the discussion of them serves to exemplify or enforce the method" (Dewey 1908:86). So at least in this essay Dewey makes it clear that pragmatism for him is primarily a method or an attitude. Also Schiller defines his humanism – which is generally seen as a form of pragmatism (see for example James 1991:32) – as a "philosophical attitude" (Schiller 1912:xxiii). So there is a rather strong argument for considering pragmatism to be primary an attitude.

My aim in this essay is to try to explicate this attitude that is said to be peculiar to pragmatism. Before going to the actual content of this attitude a few remarks are in place. Firstly, I am not claiming that seeing pragmatism as an attitude is the only way to conceive pragmatism³ and secondly, the version of pragmatic attitude that I am offering is by no means *the* attitude of pragmatism. The individual philosophers under the umbrella of pragmatism are so various and equipped with so different attitudes towards philosophy, humanity, nature of inquiry and reality that it would be a futile task to try to convince my fellow colleagues that it is an attitude – and one specific attitude for that matter – that unites them all. As there seems to be as many pragmatisms as there are pragmatists⁴ it is much more probable that there doesn't exist any necessary or sufficient group of attitudes of pragmatism. Seen from the perspective of attitudes, pragmatism should rather be considered as a broad church of differing attitudes that carry family resemblances without there being any single attitude that all pragmatists would be willing to sign.

Therefore my effort should not be seen as in any way trying to mould the whole tradition of pragmatism into one doctrine. My effort should rather be seen as an attempt to formulate one version of the attitude behind pragmatism. To be more specific, my attempt is in the end to describe the collection of attitudes that I have found most appealing in the writings of the pragmatists; the attitudes that I see as forming the basic building blocks of my own philosophical inquiry. In this way this essay aims to be part of the "new era in philosophy" that Dewey talks about, in which "we shall have to discover the personal factors that now unconsciously influence us, and begin to accept a new and moral responsibility for them, for judging and testing them by their consequences" (Dewey 1908:97). In the best case this attempt to explicate the basic attitudes of my version of pragmatism could trigger up a dialogue between different pragmatists about the basic attitudes they hold dear. Through this

³ Defining pragmatism through its theory of truth seems to be evenly conceivable option. In fact more often than not pragmatism seems to be defined ambiguously *both* as a method *and* a theory of truth. This ambiguity is present in both James (1991) and Dewey (1908) as well as in Schiller (1907). Whether or not this ambiguity can be resolved is an open question but a few remarks about it are presented in the next chapter.

⁴ The phrase is usually attributed to Schiller (1907) but originates from Max Meyer's (1908:326) pen (Pietarinen 2008). Since then it has been used countless times to characterize the diversity of thinking labeled as pragmatism (see for example Pihlström 1996:9-10; Haack 1996).

more transparency and reflectivity would be possible and our understanding of each other and ourselves would be enhanced. My effort is perhaps best summed up using William James (1991:3) words, taken from the preface of his book *Pragmatism*: "I have sought to unify the picture as it presents itself to my own eyes, dealing in broad strokes."

This attempt to explicate and argue for the basic attitudes of a certain way of thinking is deeply circular⁵. The way of describing matters and arguing in the beginning of the essay is informed and relies on some attitudes and convictions discussed only later on in the text. This is inevitable and I can only feel sorry for the limits of the media I have chosen for presenting these ideas. The attitudes of pragmatism inform my text collectively and in tandem – they are constantly present in the text – but the linearity of written language forces me to speak of only one thing at a time. Speaking and arguing for basic attitudes of thinking cannot rely on anything else than the very basic attitudes one is speaking about so the circularity is inevitable. The attempt of this essay therefore is analogous to Baron von Münchhausen's effort of escaping from a swamp through pulling himself up by his own hair.

Attitudes, methods, theories – separated by a thin line of reflection

What is then the difference between attitudes, methods and theories? Or to put the question more critically, can attitudes really be separated from specific theories? Aren't behind any attitudes certain commitments about the nature of reality or the human being that justify and give rise to that specific attitude? For example when James (1991:27) talks about the attitude of looking towards consequences rather than supposed necessary principles this seems to be justified by the fact that for pragmatism the reality "is still in the process of making" in contrast to the believe that "there is an eternal edition of it ready-made and complete." (James 2002:226). But this doesn't seem to be a mere attitude but a conviction about the basic nature of reality – and a very modern conviction for that matter. During the last couple of centuries has the Western world increasingly adopted an attitude that sees the world and humanity in progressive movement rather than viewing the world as a more static constellation which was the more dominant view during the medieval times⁶. Convinced as we are of this progression, the attitude of pragmatism might seem to us as refreshingly natural and self-evident but we should understand that for a thinker from a different period of time or from a different cultural tradition the attitude can seem deeply counter-intuitive.

The classical pragmatists seem to offer no help in resolving the ambiguity between pragmatism as an attitude, as a method or as a theory. For James (1991:27) pragmatic method means an attitude of orientation and similarly Dewey (1908) is glad to see pragmatic method as an attitude without seeing any urge to explicitly separate the two concepts from each other. James (1991), Dewey (1908) and Schiller (1907) all talk about pragmatism as both

⁵ As Pihlström (1996:17) puts the matter: "For reasons based on pragmatism, I admit that effective philosophical argumentation form pragmatism can only start from pragmatism."

⁶ Dewey acknowledges that this sort of worldview is behind the birth and success of pragmatism: "It is beyond doubt that the progressive and unstable character of American life and civilization has facilitated the birth of philosophy which regards the world as being in continuous formation, where there is still place for indeterminism, for the new and for a real future" (Dewey LW 2: 19; quoted from Jackson 2006:61).

a theory of truth and as an attitude without any visible attempt to answer the question of what is the relationship between these two elements of pragmatism.

My opinion – which is in line with the pragmatic spirit of continuation of which I will have more to say later on – is that a definite line separating attitudes, methods and theories does not exist. Instead these three lay along the same continuum and could be placed on an axis based on the amount of reflection they have gone through. Starting from the unreflective end of the spectrum we find there the ways of seeing the world that we are not even aware of. This includes intuitions and implicit attitudes we have about the way the world works. James states that “few people have definitely articulated philosophies of their own. But almost every one has his own peculiar sense of a certain total character in the universe, and of the inadequacy fully to match it of the peculiar systems that he knows.” (James 1991:20.) Thus it is our deeply-held intuitive attitudes that make certain philosophical doctrines seem right and others wrong even before we are able to explicitly say what we like or dislike about them. James’s notable examples are *the tender-minded* and *the tough-minded* who come to philosophy from highly differing angles and are also in search of different kinds of things in their philosophical inquiry (James 1991:9). These basic temperaments have according to James a significant but usually unnoticed effect on our outspoken philosophical doctrines. Philosopher’s temperament “gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises” (James 1991:7)⁷. On a more personal level I remember how certain titles of books – such as ‘Pragmatism without foundations’ (Margolis 2007) or ‘Realism with a human face’ (Putnam 1990b) have felt highly attractive even before I had any idea of the actual content of these books. Somehow they have appealed to my then-implicit intuitive attitudes about certain philosophical questions long before I could formulate any kind of answer to these basic questions. This kind of intuitive sense of ‘feeling right’ was thus what led me becoming interested in pragmatism in the first place.

Attitudes then present the convictions we are attached to even before any conscious reflection on them. They are not just ‘cold’ facts but can be thought of as forms of thinking that we are in some way attached to and that have a strong effect on our assessments of the world and of other opinions. But taken as such attitudes waver between being conscious and non-conscious. Certain attitudes that affect our thinking we can hold without even being aware of these attitudes. Some other attitudes we might have become aware of but have not put them under systematic scrutiny. We might therefore want to make a further distinction between intuitive, non-conscious attitudes and those attitudes we are aware of. This distinction might be useful for some purposes but even here we must remember that the line of being conscious about something and not being conscious about it is not strict. Something can be ‘just out of awareness’ or ‘slightly’ conscious.

⁷ Such basic temperaments are also used by Dewey to explain why it is so hard for many people to accept the ways of thinking put forward by pragmatism. "I can imagine that many would not accept this method in philosophy for very diverse reasons, perhaps among the most potent of which is lack of faith in the power of the elements and processes of experience and life to guarantee their own security and prosperity; because, that is, of the feeling that the world of experience is so unstable, mistaken, and fragmentary that it must have an absolutely permanent, true, and complete ground" (Dewey 1908:87). I find this reason as valid today as it was a hundred year ago in explaining the resistance pragmatism often faces. Human nature and basic temperament are very slow to change.

After attitudes, methods are the next level on our way away from ignorance. Taking an attitude or certain attitudes to be a method is already a much more reflective take on these attitudes. No longer are these attitudes just in the back of our heads, now they are taken out in the public; they are given a certain form in language thus making them something which we can collectively discuss about. Commitment to a method is a reflective decision that requires the method to be given a definite and outspoken form. In other words it needs to be explicitly and carefully described so that it can really be analyzed. After the analysis one can accept the method and accept it as part of one's philosophical outlook. Accepting a method is thus something that happens *after* reflection while attitudes we can hold before any reflection – in fact the attitudes we hold guide our very reflective process. Taking pragmatism to be a method is therefore to say that the attitudes it consists of have been explicitly described and thought-through after which they have been reflectively and publicly accepted.

When a certain attitude reaches the stage of a theory even more conscious flesh is gathered around its unreflected core. Stating something to be a theory it is no longer enough to merely take it for granted. One needs to carefully show how one has arrived to it, what premises it is based on, what analytical steps one has taken to reach it, how one defends it against the possible philosophical criticism and what are the main consequences of it. A theory represents in a way the most sophisticated fruits of reflective thinking, the convictions that have passed through the most rigorous testing. Theories are the diamonds of human thinking – they present how far it is possible to escape from the unreflectivity and intuitive biases inherent in human thinking.

But it must be remembered that every theory is based on some premises and some steps of reasoning that must all be credible in order for the theory to be believable. The premises themselves – and among premises one must count the ones that make certain ways of reasoning plausible – can be either other theories or some attitudes. And these further theories are again based on some further attitudes or theories. So when looked deeply enough we see that every rock-house of a theory in the end stands above a swamp of attitudes. These attitudes might be so basic and deeply-held – e.g. the law of contradiction – that we are unwilling to sacrifice them in any situation. Nevertheless they are attitudes so we must appreciate the fact that below every theory is a web of explicit and implicit attitudes, methods and other theories that collectively support it.

Every theory is thus acceptable only if one is able to accept both its explicit and implicit premises. This is seen especially clearly in the reception of James's (1991) version of pragmatic theory of truth. Taken at face value and conceived from a non-pragmatic background understanding, the theory might seem as immediately refutable and so it has been treated by surprisingly large numbers of philosophers⁸. This is understandable because to really appreciate the theory – or at least be in a position to criticize it appropriately – one would need to already be initiated into the pragmatic way of approaching questions such as

⁸ Bertrand Russell might be a good example here. Much of this reception is of course explained by the careless way James presented his idea which provided the unsympathetic reader with plenty of material to complain about (Margolis 2006:7). It does not, however, explain why many of the readers approached the theory with such unsympathy in the first place.

truth. Instead the critics have shown “genuine unfamiliarity in the whole point of view” (James 2002:181) and sheer hostility towards the lack of absoluteness and finality in pragmatic theory of truth. Their own take on truth seems to be fixed around the idea that truth must be somehow ‘secured’ and absolute and pragmatism fails to provide such absoluteness. From a pragmatic understanding it would be clear that such absoluteness they are looking for is not ever possible in the fallible human world. Approaching the pragmatic conception of truth without being convinced about the pragmatic way of inquiry explains why “the critics have boggled at every word they could boggle at, and refused to take the spirit rather than the letter of our discourse” (James 2002:181). This is one more reason for taking the attitudes rather than certain theories to be primary in pragmatism.

Having sketched the differences between attitudes, methods and theories a few words are in place to describe the process of philosophical inquiry. According to Dewey (2008:104) “inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.” My attempt is not to build a full theory of philosophical inquiry nor to analyze or judge Dewey’s (2008) theory of inquiry⁹. My attempt is to provide a first sketch of an understanding of philosophical inquiry because this understanding – as it is – informs the way this very essay is structured. It is not a theory but a sort of pre-understanding of philosophical inquiry, the understanding within which my philosophical inquiry as of today proceeds. Through conducting philosophical inquiry in a reflective way this understanding is due to develop and get more sophisticated in the future. Laying it out now as it is I see as necessary to be as explicit as possible about the sort of philosophy this essay presents.

Every inquiry has to start from somewhere, “in every philosophy we must take some things for granted” (Schiller 1912:xxi). And where a philosophical inquiry ultimately starts from is never a certain fixed point. Instead it starts from some attitudes and beliefs – explicit or implicit – which guide the direction of the inquiry, legislate certain procedures during the inquiry and identify certain beliefs as legitimate end-results of the inquiry, in other words make possible the very act of inquiry. The attitudes one starts one’s philosophical inquiry with are usually – and hopefully – not the same as the ones one ends it with. The philosophical inquiry is holistic and recursive process in which the very attitudes become more conscious, play against each other and evolve throughout this process. They are in no way static and unchangeable. During a philosophical inquiry it is likely that one comes to view some of one’s attitudes as refutable – they might oppose some other more valued attitudes – and abandon them. Because of the reflective character of philosophical inquiry this holistic change process is an inherent part of it.

Attitudes are what we have in the beginning of our philosophical inquiry; they are the inexplicable convictions that guide our philosophical inquiry. The philosophical journey then can be characterized as a journey from implicit attitudes towards more explicit doctrines and theories, from indeterminate situation towards more determination. It is a journey towards increased reflection about one’s own convictions and certainties. By recognizing and

⁹ According to Margolis (2006:8) it was “heroically unsuccessful in its detailed reading of formal logic but holistically impressive in the sense it provides of the sheer instrumentality of logic and reason themselves.”

describing a previously implicit attitude one can turn it into an explicit attitude. By giving it a definite form and committing oneself explicitly to it one turns this attitude into a method. In finally being able to deeply describe, analyze and defend the attitude one is legitimized to call it a theory. No exact criterion exists to separate these stages from each other.

After this long bypath into the nature of attitudes and philosophical inquiry it is finally time to turn to the actual attitudes characterizing pragmatism. In calling the following principles attitudes rather than theories or beliefs I am drawing attention to the fact that these beliefs are what we find in the beginning of the philosophical journey of a pragmatist. They are not the results of a rigorous philosophical inquiry but rather the backbones supporting such inquiry. They are what constitutes a certain way of approaching the world in a philosophical manner. To use the term somewhat loosely one could say that these principles and attitudes are the transcendental conditions through which one's philosophical inquiry is made. Therefore it is not my task to try to prove these attitudes here as they are the very attitudes through which one judges certain philosophical positions as good or bad in the first place. The aim is rather to become more conscious about them and through that act of reflection start to take greater responsibility (Dewey 1908:97) of them.

Elements of the pragmatic attitude

What is then the pragmatic attitude? What content should we give to the attitude held to be the core of pragmatism? The standard definition would be James's definition of the pragmatic method: "The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts." (James 1991:27). This is according to Dewey (1908:85) the briefest but most comprehensive way to formulate the basic idea behind pragmatism.¹⁰ Both James and Dewey see this as an attitude that could - and should - be applied to a wide number of questions, in fact "into every area where inquiry may fruitfully be carried on" (Dewey 1908:86). According to Dewey it had already been applied to topics such as philosophic controversies, to proper way of conceiving objects, to ideas, and to how beliefs actually work (Dewey 1908:87). Already in this brief definition many basic elements of pragmatistic thinking are present; such as the suspicion against any absolute and necessary principles that would be more basic than our human experience and the forward-looking characteristic of pragmatic thinking that looks primarily at the consequences.

So pragmatism could be seen as primarily "an attitude of orientation that looks to outcomes and consequences" (Dewey 1908:85). But to truly appreciate this attitude behind pragmatism I feel that we need to break it into a number of pieces. Rather than taking pragmatism to be exhausted by this one basic attitude I take it to be constituted by a number of attitudes that are more or less intertwined. But where should we start? As these attitudes are intertwined and recommend each other in a circular manner it is somewhat arbitrary to try to say that one of the attitudes presented here is more fundamental than the others. This is further emphasized by the fact that anti-foundationalism is among these attitudes of pragmatism.

¹⁰ Dewey also acknowledges Peirce's 'laboratory habit of mind' as a source of this sort of attitude. Peirce may have thought of it as a method for science but Dewey (1908:86) is willing to extend it "into every area where inquiry may fruitfully be carried on."

But writing is a linear process and is thus unable to capture the simultaneity and parallel functioning of the attitudes chosen to be presented here. So we have to start from somewhere. For me – and for Schiller (see 1912:xxi) – at least the most natural starting-point would be the human condition from which we as human beings start out our inquiry and which pragmatism is especially keen on embracing. So it is with it that we start.

The human condition as the starting point

“As soon as one realizes that we all, inescapably, live our lives as members of one or another human community with both individual and social ends and purposes in view, one has almost become a pragmatist” (Pihlström 1996:9). Taking seriously the human condition and acknowledging that even in our furthest leaps of philosophy or science we are **inescapably** bound by it is what I have come to appreciate as the core of pragmatism. This attitude of starting from the particular human condition is perhaps most clear in Schiller’s writings as he even labeled his version of pragmatism as *humanism*. For Schiller – and for pragmatism in general I would argue – “the only natural starting-point, from which we can proceed in every direction” is the “world of man’s experience as it has come to seem to him” (Schiller 1912:xxi). *Humanism* in pragmatism means the acknowledgement of the inescapable human condition within which we are embedded in and maintenance of this acknowledgement throughout the philosophical inquiry.

One could argue that the human condition is the only possible starting point for any inquiry – be it philosophical, scientific or anything else. For what else do we have? Whatever philosophical doctrines or metaphysical views we have come to embrace, haven’t we come to them through our own experience, by hearing about them, by arriving to them through our thought-activity, by seeing them as fitting our experience of the world? Whatever abstract conceptual apparatus we manipulate in our philosophical discussions isn’t our ability to talk about them the result of coming to grasp these concepts from the life-situation we are in? We must start from human experience – quite simply because there is nothing else we have.

So taking humanism as the core of pragmatism means acknowledging that human experience is all that we have. Thinking and philosophical inquiry must start from human experience and in the end it is human experience that is transformed through our philosophical and other forms of activity. Something else might be transformed as well – the *welt-an-sich*, for example, but – assuming for a moment that such a thing exists – changes in it we can only perceive as changes in our own human experience. Humanism is defined as the philosophical attitude that takes “human experience as the clue to the world of human experience” rather than “wasting thought upon attempts to construct experience *a priori*” (Schiller 1912:xxiii-xxiv). The words of Protagoras, according to which *man is the measure of all things*, might sound alarmingly subjective and solipsistic. But in the end aren’t we aware of any form of objectivity only through our subjective experience. Together with others we might construe a well-working, mutually agreed-upon and objective-appearing model of the world that we can – and do – use as the backbone of our worldview. But starting our philosophical inquiry from that model, taking its conceptualizations to be the objective world and proceeding from there is the fallacy of traditional philosophy. Indeed, that might be the fundamental difference in attitude separating pragmatism from traditional philosophy. Taking the pragmatistic attitude, this objective-appearing worldview must be seen against the

backdrop of the fact that in the end we are only aware of our subjective experience and nothing beyond it.

Pragmatism is thus a deeply humanistic philosophy. It doesn't start out with a readymade world or with a God's-eye view of the reality. Instead it starts out more humbly from the limited capacities of "finite human lives" acknowledging "the deep informality of all such inquiries and their dependence on the flux of social and practical life" (Margolis 2006:8). This means that there is, for us, "no completely 'neutral' place from which to begin one's argumentation in [- -] broad, all-inclusive philosophical matters" (Pihlström 1996:16). Our philosophizing doesn't start from a neutral position but always in the midst of our human life with the attitudes and certainties that we happen to hold. By refusing to forget the boundness of our thinking in our human condition pragmatism aims for intellectual honesty. Pragmatism operates in a 're-anthropomorphized universe' from which it naturally follows that also the philosophical inquiry must be 're-humanized'.

As I have tried to emphasize, this humanism should not be seen as a theory about the order of the world but rather as an attitude, the starting point of our inquiry. It is more part of the apparatus through which we evaluate philosophical positions than a definite philosophical position. As Pihlström (1996:17) states "to philosophers who are not at all interested in the contingent fact that we happen to be humans existing in irreducibly human situations, located in a human world, the pragmatist does not have very much to say." So this humanism should not be confused with any fixed and detailed ontological position. The question of what ontological position we should end up with if we take the pragmatic outlook as our starting point is a complicated one involving a number of answers with different strengths and weaknesses (for a discussion about them, see Pihlström 1996). These different positions might have evolved from some or other form of pragmatic attitude but in this essay we stay at the level of attitudes, not going to its philosophically more sophisticated consequences. Schiller seems to appreciate this interpretation of humanism as first and foremost an attitude. He states that this humanism is an "attitude of thought" which he knows "to be habitual" in both his own and in William James's thinking (Schiller 1912:xx). Humanism here thus means an attitude; a way of approaching philosophical questions.

The reason I have chosen appreciation of the human condition as the first attitude of pragmatism is that I see it at the background of many of the other attitudes, motivating them. It is through acknowledging the limitations of us humans as knowledge-acquirers that one comes to appreciate anti-foundationalism and fallibilism as an essential part of any sound philosophical attitude. It is this interest in finite human lives that motivates the forward-looking characteristic of pragmatism. And honest appreciation of the human condition also makes us see how our thinking is embedded in action.

Acting more fundamental than thinking

As human beings we are thrown into the world in which we need to act. Enactors of our human condition we never are neutral observers of the world but engaged in it from the very beginning. We are first and foremost creatures that *act* in the world and only secondarily creatures that contemplate and *think* about the world. In the pragmatic outlook thinking is seen as a special form of action, calling it a meta-form of acting would perhaps do it justice. Quite tentatively we could state that thinking is action through which we control and influence our behavior. It is an inner form of action through which our outer behavior is

enhanced. So our thinking is in the final analysis a tool for our action and while it seems to have acquired a life of its own quite independent of our mundane strivings we should never forget its humble origins. Building on David Hume's example we could say that as we leave our chambers of philosophical thought and enter into the everyday life we leave our fancy philosophical ideas behind and live according to the functional habits we have acquired through our embeddedness in the social and physical fabric of the outside world.

This thesis that "in a certain sense, practice is primary in philosophy" is one of the theses which "became the basis of the philosophies of Peirce, and above all of James and Dewey" (Putnam 1994:152; quoted from Pihlström 1996:9). It is an attitude or habit of thought through which these pragmatists grasp reality and what it means to be a human agent in this reality. But action before thought should not be interpreted too strongly, as building a strict hierarchy between action on the one hand and thought-processes quite independent of action on the other hand. As Sami Pihlström (1996:9) notes: "The pragmatist need not, and should not, simply claim that practice is prior to theory; rather, she can deny the usefulness of any sharp dichotomy between 'practice' and 'theory' in human affairs." Here again pragmatism is suspicious of dichotomies and instead sees action and thought as intertwined and part of the same continuum. Also the usual caveat that this thesis should be interpreted as an attitude rather than a theory applies here. So no sophisticated theory of praxis or the habituation of our action is possible or even desirable here. Nevertheless, pragmatists of all stripes seem to acknowledge that in some way or other thought is embedded in action.

Anti-Foundationalism

Usually being *for* something means that one inevitably is *against* something else. Through embracing the human condition pragmatism comes to position foundationalism as its prime enemy. In stating his affinities with the humanism, Schiller immediately points out what he opposes: existence of any "eternal and non-human truths" and any "infallible *a priori* tests of truth" (Schiller 1897:548; quoted from Schiller 1912:xx). The attitude of "looking away from first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities" (James 1991:27) is an attitude that views every fixed Archimedean starting-point for inquiry with deep suspicion stating that as much as we would want it to be otherwise for us fallible human beings there is no sure-fire groundings from where to start. James positions as his opponent that "typical idol of the tribe, the notion of *the* Truth, conceived as the one answer, determinate and complete, to the one fixed enigma which the world is believed to propound" (James 1991:105). Anti-foundationalism can thus be seen as the other side of the coin of taking seriously the human condition.

This anti-foundationalist attitude comes out in many forms in pragmatism. Perhaps the clearest expressions of it are found in Peirce's doctrine of fallibilism¹¹. In coming to embrace fallibilism we acknowledge that "our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy" (CP 1.171). On the whole "we cannot in any way reach perfect certitude nor exactitude. We never can be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general

¹¹ It must be noted that although Peirce might have built his fallibilism into doctrine here I am using his words to characterize a certain attitude and not taking issues with it as a fully-developed doctrine. The same caveat applies to synechism to which I turn next.

ratio” (CP 1.147-149)¹². This attitude of abandoning all sure groundings for one’s knowledge is not easy to achieve, it is something we have to work up to. “The pragmatist knows that doubt is an art which has to be acquired with difficulty” (CP 6.498).

Theories “thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest” (James 1991:26). It might be worth mentioning that this anti-foundationalistic attitude puts one quite close to the Socratic ideal of philosopher as a lover of wisdom who seeks fulfillment in the *process* of contemplation rather than in some fixed and final *results* of such inquiry. Anti-foundationalism thus connects to the attitude of eternal search and the cultivation of wisdom rather than acquisition of knowledge. Through unstiffening all our theories (James 1991:26) the pragmatic attitude makes us open to new forms of thinking, to constant improvement of our worldview. The ideal pragmatist has “no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence.” (James 1991:38.)¹³

Synechism – the attitude of continuity

Already a few times in this essay I have had to take recourse to the fact that one part of the pragmatic attitude is seeing the world as continuous stream rather than a collection of static and strict dichotomies and fixed categories. The way reality seems to be sliced up is as much a result of our activity of slicing it up as it is a feature of the reality itself. According to Suckiel’s (2006:33) interpretation of William James’s philosophy “experience is a continuous stream, the elements of which have no distinct boundaries, and hence that the relations between things are as real, as directly experienced, as the things themselves.” James expressed his dissatisfaction with "the ruling tradition of philosophy" for its adherence to "the Platonic and Aristotelian belief that fixity is a nobler and worthier thing than change" (James 2005:237). Rather than seeing the dichotomies we experience as objective parts of reality pragmatism views them as distinctions we have made to better be able to operate with it. They are “merely functional distinctions which may be made within the stream of experience – distinctions which have proven useful to human subjects as they seek to fulfill their purposes and interests” (Suckiel 2006:33).

Again, Peirce seems to capture this attitude of thought best in his doctrine of *synechism*, the “tendency to regard everything as continuous” (EP 2:1). According to Haack synechism translated into the terminology of our day means “to favor hypotheses that treat supposed differences of kind as really only significant differences of degree” (Haack 2006:142). Thus pragmatism is suspicious about all the dichotomies we experience and of all the dualisms held as fixed in traditional philosophy viewing sharp distinctions as “lines of demarcation drawn at some point in the continuum” (Haack 2006:142). Be it the dualism between knower and known, subjective and objective, mental and physical or fact and value, the pragmatist views them with the attitude of synechism; not believing them to be ontologically

¹² In here I would like to express my gratitude to the Commens Dictionary of Peirce’s Terms [<http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html>] from which these quotes were found.

¹³ In here James doesn’t speak of ‘ideal pragmatist’ but just plainly about pragmatist, but reaching a state where one has overcome all one’s dogmas I would consider more as an ideal to aim at rather than a position one can simply claim to have.

basic but attempting to find underlying continuities between them. Viewing reality as continuous and flowing rather than static and distinct is thus very much at the core of pragmatic view of the world¹⁴. As James (2005:253) stated "the essence of life is its continuously changing character."

Looking forward

One of the most characteristic features of the pragmatic outlook is its forward-looking nature. The attitude of looking towards last things, fruits and consequences is an attitude that is first and foremost interested in the future – in the question of how can we best influence our future through our thinking. In pragmatism, ideas, theories and attitudes are in the end judged by their prospective consequences – through their capacity for impact. Ideas are “essentially intentions”, plans and methods through which we attempt to have an effect on our future (Dewey 1908:86). James sees that the essential contrast between pragmatism and more traditional philosophy of rationalism is that reality “for pragmatism is still in the making” (James 1991:113). The future is open and our actions and thinking can have impact on it so it is this end that our philosophical inquiry should serve. “What *you* want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives” (James 1991:12). Thinking and the resulting theories are *put to work*, they are used in our practical endeavors. “We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid” (James 1991:26).

This forward-looking role that pragmatism gives to thinking can be connected to James understanding of the human condition. For James consciousness is teleological in nature, “understanding of all mental activity and its products must include reference to the agent’s purposes and interests” (Suckiel 2006:32). Still it should be clear that looking forward is very much an attitude rather than a fixed theoretical doctrine. It is an attitude through which a pragmatist views all theories, ideas, believes and other attitudes put forward him. More deeply, it could be stated that it is an attitude through which a pragmatist lives her life in which intellectual inquiry is but one element.

Transcending the fact-value dichotomy

At this point it doesn’t come as a surprise that part of the pragmatic attitude is a denial of any categorical distinction between facts and values. This attitude flows naturally from the careful appreciation of the human condition that is part of pragmatism. The way we see the world is never direct, it is inescapably ‘contaminated’ by our ways of perceiving it. These ways of perception affect what we pay attention to, how we perceive certain features of the world, what we see as being together and what we see as separate, not to mention the emotional and behavioral reactions that are triggered automatically by certain perceptive patterns. Thus when we build up our ‘neutral’ perception of the world we do it through

¹⁴ If one would start to develop this attitude more systematically one might end up with some form of process philosophy in which “natural existence consists in and is best understood in terms of *processes* rather than *things* — of modes of change rather than fixed stabilities” (Rescher 2008) If gross generalizations are allowed one might also note that the process viewpoint on reality is at the core of many Oriental worldviews while the fixed viewpoint is more what modern Western thinking has been about.

appreciating such cognitive values as coherence, simplicity, and instrumental efficacy; without any such values to guide our perception we would not have any sensible view of the world; it would be mere obscure sensations. (Putnam 1990a.)

Pragmatism then doesn't see any foundational distinction between these types of cognitive values and other types of values such as ethical values. Putnam (1990a:139), for example, sees these cognitive values as "part of our holistic conception of human flourishing", contributing to good live through an ideal of theoretical intelligence. Constructing a view of the world out of 'sensory stimulations' we need an intentional, valuational, referential work of 'synthesis' (Putnam 1990a:141). So instead of viewing distinctions between facts and values as ontologically primary pragmatism starts from the human condition where our perception is already contaminated by values. Only after acknowledgment of this condition is it time to start seeing if there are any functionally sensible distinctions to be made between different forms of sensations and different forms of values.

Meliorism

Reality for pragmatism "is still in the making" and as human beings we take an interest in our future. In looking towards last things, fruits and consequences it is quite natural to assume that we are interested in positive rather than negative kind of consequences. This interest in improving our human lives is what meliorism is about. This attitude is most visible in Dewey, for whom pragmatism seems to be a way of employing intelligence for the betterment of both individual life and humankind in general (Jackson 2006:60).

But defined like that meliorism can be interpreted in at least four different ways. The first is a thesis about the way the world is. It is a doctrine according to which "the world is neither the worst nor the best possible, but that it is capable of improvement" (Century Dictionary 1889-1991)¹⁵. It thus positions itself against both optimism and pessimism believing that "the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered" (Dewey MW 12:181-182). The first formulation of meliorism being about the way of the world the second is about the nature of human being. According to it as human beings we are interested in improving our future and all our endeavors – even the seemingly purely intellectual ones – are in the end in service of such improvement. This is what Dewey seems to be after when he sees pragmatism as a form of thinking that "gives birth to distinctive act which modify future facts and events in such a way as to render them more reasonable, that is to say, more adequate to the ends which we propose for ourselves" (Dewey LW 2: 18). Framing our intellectual endeavors to be at the bottom line about the improvement of human life is thus the second interpretation of meliorism.

In addition to these two views on meliorism there is an openly normative thesis that can be derived from this kind of meliorism. According to it philosophy should be the instrument for improving human life, not just a way of understanding it. Dewey (MW 10:46) calls for a recovery of philosophy as "a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the

¹⁵ This characterization of meliorism is alleged to Peirce (see Bergman 2009). Whether or not meliorism is part of Peirce's idea of pragmatism is a complicated question but what is clear is that he was not a proponent of meliorism in any such straightforward sense as Dewey was (again, see Bergman 2009).

problems of men.” It is a different thing to say that all philosophizing is about the improvement of human life whether we recognize it or not as compared to taking improvement of human life as the explicit guiding spirit of one’s philosophizing. But this normative thesis calls upon two different readings, the individualistic and the collectivistic. One could say that philosophy should be about the improvement of the life of the one philosophizing or one could state that philosophizing should be an activity that aims to improve the life of the whole humankind. In here we do not need to go to the complicated question of whether it was the individualistic or the collectivistic mode of normative meliorism that Dewey embraced or whether these two are intertwined. This question can be sidestepped because I would not include these normative theses as part of the pragmatic attitude. Instead I see them as an “ideal element” (Dewey LW 2: 18) of the Deweyan instrumentalism – a necessary part of his own philosophical attitude but nevertheless a separate attitude from the attitude of pragmatism¹⁶.

So at the level of attitude I would include into meliorism the first two forms of it: the attitude of improvement considering the world and approving the fact that as human beings we are inescapably interested in this form of improvement. These views I see as connected to the embracement of the human condition. We could say that as human beings we aim to improve our lives and our capacity for knowledge has developed to help us in these pragmatic purposes, so it follows directly from the acknowledgement of the human condition that thinking and knowledge are in the service of bettering our world.

Other candidates

As I have tried to emphasize the attitudes represented above are not the only possible ways of constructing the pragmatic attitude. For some other pragmatists the habituality of our acting and thinking might be the basic perceptive tool through which she pieces together the world around her. Or abductive reasoning might be for some other the center-piece of pragmatism. For still others a certain pluralistic starting-point would be part of pragmatism (see James 1991:73). I have no excuse here for why I have chosen the attitudes I have chosen, except that they are the attitudes that I have come to hold as central in my perception of pragmatism and the one’s that I see – at least loosely – as hanging together. From the rich tradition of pragmatist philosophy one could extract another list of attitudes that might be quite dissimilar to the one’s that I have chosen. I will leave to others the task of explicating them and seeing how they fit into the pragmatic palette of attitudes.

Three paradoxes of pragmatism

Having now acquired an initial characterization of the pragmatic attitude I feel the need to address three paradoxes that I see as laying at the heart of pragmatism and that need to be addressed in order to fully appreciate what it means to take the pragmatic attitude. These paradoxes all arise when one attempts to apply the attitudes represented here in practice. They consider more or less the relation between pragmatic thinking and pragmatic living. A legitimate question to ask is that if pragmatism really is a form of thinking that embraces

¹⁶ Whether Dewey himself viewed this idealism, which he at one point called ‘later form’ of pragmatism (see Jackson 2006:60), as a natural outgrowth of his pragmatic orientation, is again a question I will not attempt to answer here.

action and improvement then what is the function of pragmatic *thinking* itself? Is not dedicating one's life to philosophical inquiry quite – well – unpragmatic move to do? Through these paradoxes I attempt to show why I see that pragmatic philosophizing nevertheless can and should inform the actual and practical life of a human being.

Attitude of philosophical inquiry or an attitude of philosophical life

Starting with the attitudes presented here, the question to be asked is that are these attitudes meant to be attitudes of philosophical inquiry or attitudes for a philosophical life? The first option assumes there to be a separation between the philosopher's attitudes in the chamber when conducting philosophical inquiry and philosopher's attitudes when he conducts his or her life proper. According to this view one might entertain certain attitudes as part of one's philosophical inquiry but these attitudes do not have any necessary connection with one's attitudes outside the realm of one's purely philosophical moments. One could thus entertain another and unrelated set of attitudes that guide how one lives one's life. Being pragmatism in philosophy would not have any necessary connection with how one conducts one's life.

The second option takes the attitudes of philosophical inquiry and the attitudes of life to be intertwined. In here being a philosopher is not just a job performed from nine to five, weekends and holidays excluded. Being a philosopher is rather a way of live, living one's whole life according to the principles one has accumulated through one's philosophical journey. Although I am not aware of pragmatists such as James or Dewey dealing with this issue directly¹⁷, I have a sense that at least Dewey's life stands as a testimony of a life devoted to practice what one preaches, it was a wholehearted effort to live out the principles he explicated in his philosophical writings, to make the future a better place through his philosophical activity. Jackson (2006:60) supports this interpretation: "More than a rule to be memorized and religiously followed, pragmatism for Dewey is more like a frame of mind, or even a way of life." Sami Pihlström's interpretation of the philosophy of William James also sees it as primarily concerning the development of individual's perspective towards the world rather than the formation of objective, generally acceptable theory (Pihlström 2008:252). Philosophy is meant to be brought into world, to be lived, it is not just pure intellectual theory to be studied. This perspective of philosophy of life is according to Pihlström (2008:252) one of the keys in understanding the philosophy James (1991) presents in his lectures on Pragmatism.

Following the interpretations of Jackson and Pihlström I take the attitude of pragmatism to be a wholehearted effort to live one's life in a philosophical manner; to aim for a way of living that has been subjected under philosophical scrutiny and that one is regularly reflecting upon and constantly improving. Pragmatism, as understood here, is in the end not just an attitude of philosophical inquiry but an attitude that reaches out to the wholeness of one's life. As an attitude of living pragmatism should be seen as one that emphasizes the consequences of one's thinking and acting and aims for principles and habits of living that have been subjected under the reflection provided by the pragmatic philosophical attitudes. In the context of one's life pragmatism should thus be interpreted as an attempt to improve

¹⁷ More probably than not this is because of the large amount of their writings that I have not read rather than them not being interested in this question.

one's habits and ways of living through being philosophically conscious about them and through reflecting upon them through the pragmatic attitudes one has submitted oneself to.

Inquiry versus action gap

This attitude of philosophical reflection of one's habits and life-choices immediately brings up another paradox. When does one know that one has reflected enough to be able to act? What is the proper balance between philosophical reflection and philosophically informed acting? We can always acquire new information, reflect on the topic a bit more and attempt to be a bit more certain that we are doing the right thing. But according to fallibilism we can never be sure about the correctness of our principles so too strict demand of being certain before acting would paralyze one's actions. Nevertheless we need to act; real life situations often demand a quick response without any time for throughout reflection of the possible options. Naturally, this paradox of acting versus reflecting has no straightforward solution; the criteria for sufficient certainty are particular and depend on the situation. In the end what we can do is to be aware of this dilemma and aim for the amount of certainty which is practically most functional in any particular situation.

Attitude of holding theories lightly

The third paradox is a question about how to relate to knowledge we have accumulated through our intellectual inquiry. Pragmatism emphasizes the anti-foundationalistic attitude; one should always be open to new emerging possibilities and unexplainable experiences; to revising even one's most fundamental theories about the world. At the same time certain group of attitudes are said to be central to pragmatism and on a deeper level one's experience is always structured according to some form of principles whether one is aware of them or not. How should one relate to these attitudes? If one takes them as fundamental and unchangeable one seems to be working against one of the central tendencies of the pragmatist. If on the other hand one is not in any way committed to the attitudes of pragmatism then it is hard to see how one is a pragmatist. We seem to face two mutually exclusive demands: the demand of committing ourselves to certain attitudes and the demand to not commit oneself deeply to any attitude at all.

In resolving this paradox we must firstly acknowledge that it presents a true dilemma. These two demands are irreducible parts of pragmatism and one can not simply abandon either one of them. The resolution then comes up to balancing these two demands in a way that is most functional for the individual. As a way of balancing these demands I propose that we add to the list of pragmatist attitudes one more, *the attitude of holding theories lightly*. This attitude has been proposed by Donna Orange (1995) as part of her attempt to build an epistemology for psychoanalysis that would best serve the practitioner in her attempt of healing the psychological and emotional life of the patient. Inspired by Peirce she states that we must "hold our theories lightly, in a fallibilistic spirit, ready to be surprised and prepared to admit our theoretical and clinical mistakes" (Orange 1995:52). So we must unstiffen (James 1991:26) our attitudes and theories; they should not 'block the path of inquiry'; they should not blindfold us from encountering surprising facts and novel events. But in addition to this kind of fallibilism this is indeed an attitude of commitment. To enable any form of action and to make sense of any situation – such as the clinical situation that Orange is interested about – we need to rely on some theoretical frameworks. We need to commit ourselves to them and interpret the events through them in order to be able to act in any consistent

manner. Too much doubt about one's own commitments hinders one's ability to act; the pure doubter is a passive creature able to criticize the proposals for action of others but unable to act himself. So in practical action we need to be committed to some particular theoretical frameworks at the same time as we are aware of their shortcomings and alternative explanatory frameworks.

This kind of paradoxical attitude is of course not an easy task to achieve. As Peirce noted "the pragmatist knows that doubt is an art which has to be acquired with difficulty" (CP 6.498). Committing oneself to particular theories and ways of seeing the world but at the same time holding a certain distance to one's commitments is indeed a form of art. It can also be psychologically straining as we cannot lean back on certain theoretical groundings but must "seek support for our personal stability elsewhere" (Orange 1995:50). Mastering the art of holding theories lightly; being able to have an attitude of self-conscious commitment is something we must at times remind ourselves of, to avoid the Scylla of straightforward commitment and the Charybdis of paralyzing doubt.

Conclusion

Having now reached the end of this essay we can appreciate how this whole essay is a demonstration of the themes represented in the essay. The writing process has not been a simple exercise of putting on paper the attitudes that I see as constituting pragmatism. It has rather been a transformative activity through which I have sought to make explicit certain attitudes I have come to appreciate in pragmatism. The basic inspiration for this essay was the fact that I wanted to understand why I have such positive connotations with pragmatism, why it has appealed so strongly to my intellectual appetite. In the beginning of the writing process these attitudes weren't clarified in my mind, I wasn't so sure about what these attitudes should be or what their connections to each other are or are there some irresolvable contradictions among them. The phrase 'I don't know what I think before I have written it down' applies here. In beginning the writing process I had very vague idea of where it was taking me. This might apply to all writing processes but is especially true here because reflective attention to one's attitudes inevitably changes them. So the process of turning these partly implicit attitudes into explicit writing has been a process where these attitudes have evolved. Although they were the very principles (or some of the principles, to be more precise) that were guiding me along the way and thus enabled the whole inquiry they also changed nature somehow during the process. Although the explication of these attitudes is still in a nascent form they are at least a short step closer to becoming more formalized and explicated theories.

More generally, what I am offering in this essay is one version of what should be the furniture of the pragmatic corridor through which we pass in conducting philosophical inquiry and in living our lives as pragmatists. It is certainly a quite personal account but I see that it could not be otherwise. If being a pragmatist is holding certain attitudes then writing as a pragmatist about these attitudes one should start with oneself. Of course a more ambitious plan would be to carefully immerse oneself in the thinking of certain pragmatists and provide an account of what one sees as their guiding attitudes. But as these attitudes are mainly present as quite implicit guidelines of thinking, analyzing the attitudes of other philosophical writers might turn out to be relatively impossible as analyzer's own biases of thinking would certainly have a significant influence in these interpretations. Even if one would succeed in building a relatively believable account of the underlying thinking of a

certain philosopher this could easily be disputed and complementary accounts provided because direct textual evidence could not be taken as concluding evidence about attitudes that are by definition more evident between the lines than in the actual text. Therefore concentrating on one's own interpretation of the pragmatic attitudes in general might be the only way to ensure that the debate is about these attitudes themselves and *not* an lengthened discussion of whether a certain philosopher was operating with a certain attitude in certain part of her career or not.

By way of concluding, I want to say a word about the way of philosophizing inherent in this essay. What ultimately impresses me in James's and Dewey's philosophy is not the results of their inquiry, their detailed theories. On a theoretical level they have their flaws and are open to various criticisms (see for example Suckiel 2006; Jackson 2006). What I am really impressed by is their starting point for philosophical inquiry. Embedding into one's philosophy the understanding that one philosophizes always from a certain human condition is certainly not an easy task to fulfill. Philosophizing in a way that stays constantly conscious of its own underpinnings and underlying attitudes might be impossible to carry out in full and extremely hard to carry out even partially in a coherent way. It is so much easier to start philosophical inquiry from an established framework of given premises and given ways of proceeding the inquiry. Starting from determinate groundings one can do relatively non-reflective philosophy and still succeed fairly well. But the path from an indeterminate situation to determinate knowledge is much harder to walk. This *humaner* approach to philosophy may not be as exact, analytic or confident as more idealized way of doing philosophy. But it seems to be more honest and less an intellectual escape from the particularities of human life. Whether or not such indeterminate philosophy can be built up into coherent theories in the future; whether or not its inherent problems can be solved; whether or not different attitudes fit together or are in irresolvable conflict, are not the questions of this essay. In a way, this essay is the beginning, not the end of philosophical inquiry.

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