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## **Pragmatist theory of knowledge : critical analysis**

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## PRAGMATIST THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

### Critical Analysis

The Introduction sets out, and gives reasons for, the theme of the present work. This concentrates on the pragmatist theory of knowledge as the nucleus of pragmatist philosophy. Another relevant aspect of pragmatism, i. e. the way it solves problems of philosophical anthropology, is dealt with only marginally. Attention is centred on American representatives of pragmatism, thought to be the most important.

The first chapter, called On the History and Social Nature of Pragmatism, is a brief account of the history of pragmatism, which assesses the contribution of C.S. Peirce and other members of the Metaphysical Club to the foundation of American pragmatism. It is beyond dispute that Peirce prepared the ground for the development of pragmatism in other authors. Peirce's philosophical views differ in a number of points from the fully formed pragmatism of James, Dewey and others. Neither can the part played by other members of the Metaphysical Club be underestimated; besides Peirce it was, above all, Chauncey Wright, who had a strong influence on William James's opinions.

William James elaborates pragmatism, especially its psychological views, the pragmatists teaching of "belief", applied in the sphere of knowledge and action, pragmatist empiricism and the theory of truth, pluralism and pragmatist views on religion. Further development of pragmatism was influenced mainly by James's article The Will to Believe, and by his work Principles of Psychology, which not only expresses the psychological views of pragmatism but is also the canon of the pragmatist theory of knowledge.

Together with Peirce, Dewey and the English philosopher F. C. S. Schiller, James belongs to the chief representatives of pragmatism and is one of its classics.

In his numerous writings John Dewey works out especially the pragmatist theory of knowledge, logic, psychology, educational theory, political and sociological views, ethics, pragmatist views on religion.

Although Dewey, like James, devoted himself also to philosophical problems connected with anthropology, his work, compared with James's, has the appearance of positivist scientism.

Dewey was very active in political life, which corresponded to his bourgeois democratic belief and to the proclamation of democratism in his theoretical writings. Dewey's philosophical and other doctrines not only belonged to the official ideology in the United States but were, at the same time, a source of ideology for the American social democracy.

F. C. S. Schiller worked mainly on pragmatist logic, the theory of knowledge, ethics, social and political views and views on religion. He was quite influential but, compared with James and Dewey, played only a secondary part in the formation of pragmatism.

C. H. Mead worked mostly on pragmatist ontology, sociology and social psychology. C. W. Morris, apart from holding views similar to those of other pragmatists, also advocates the so-called semiotic, which is a synthesis of pragmatist philosophy and behaviourism on one hand and of semantical philosophy on the other. Morris is chiefly concerned with the theory of knowledge, logic and psychology. A modernizer of pragmatism is the historian and philosopher Sidney Hook.

Logie and the pragmatist theory of knowledge were elaborated by C. I. Lewis.

In the examination of how pragmatism links up with the European tradition of thinking, a special place is reserved to the problem of the relation between pragmatism and positivism. The pragmatists themselves are not unanimous in answering the question whether pragmatism is a certain kind of positivism.

What distinguishes pragmatism from the traditional European positivism is, among other things, its emphasis on activity, interest in ontological problems, a developed voluntarist and irrationalist aspect and an effort to be a practical philosophy of man. As an empiricist philosophy, pragmatism has, of course, important features in common with positivism, and in contemporary philosophy its influence is especially felt in some forms of modern positivism.

The fact that pragmatism aims at a practical mission of philosophy and wants to fulfil the function of a philosophy of man makes it appear somewhat similar to Marxism. But the substance of pragmatism, which is the opposite of Marxism, is essentially different.

By its anthropological aspect pragmatism is, to a certain extent, related to existential philosophy, but it is not so deep and rather less elaborate in concepts. Besides, the pragmatist philosophy of man has, on the whole, a more extrovert nature.

In its biological orientation pragmatism links up with Darwinism, to which it is also a certain philosophical reaction.

On the whole, pragmatism is in favour of religion and brings, mainly in James's works, new and original apologetics of religious faith.

In comparison with other trends of non-Marxist philosophy, pragmatism spread widely and influenced large strata of society. This was conditioned by the fact that it could easily be popularized and that it expressed and developed philosophically the attitudes and mentality which had been formed before.

Pragmatism spread most in the U.S.A. It is primarily an American affair. But it is not a phenomenon which is exclusively American, especially because of its parallel rise in Europe.

Pragmatism took root in various countries. Its effect was felt in Czechoslovakia, too, where it is usual to connect it mainly with the name of Karel Capek. The influence of pragmatism on Karel Capek, however, was formerly overestimated. Capek managed to elaborate his own Weltanschauung-approach in his work, accepting suggestions not only from pragmatism but also from other philosophies.

From the sociological point of view, pragmatism is usually classified as the philosophy of American imperialism. Besides the elements of political conservatism pragmatism contains marked elements of bourgeois democratism and is connected with neoliberalism.

The dispute of pragmatists against Marxism (Dewey, Hook) is lead from the position of pluralism, indeterminism and meliorism. In more recent authors such criticism is accompanied by efforts to modify pragmatist philosophy so that it may resemble Marxism.

The second chapter, Pragmatism and the Basic Question of Philosophy, points out that the pragmatist method of solving problems leads into a criticism of the tradition to ask the basic philosophical question, considered to be sterile. Reconstruction in philosophy demands devotion to problems that are more necessary for man's life and his happiness. (Dewey). The negative approach of pragmatism to the concept of matter is based on an idealistic conception of experience. Pragmatism generally regards itself as a third way in philosophy. The principal part is played by the idea of pure or neutral experience which is neither matter nor consciousness. The central philosophical problem is considered to be the question of one and many. But pragmatism is not a neutral philosophy in relation to materialism and idealism, it is in fact predominantly idealistic. Of course, what cannot be neglected is the fact that pragmatism contains elements of materialism, for example in the field of pragmatist psychology, where it is also possible to find distorted elements of dialectics (James).

The third chapter, Pragmatist Conception of Experience and Practice, deals with the concept of experience, which, together with the concept of activity and practice, forms one categorical complex in pragmatism. The category of experience stands out very prominently in pragmatism, for an empirist viewpoint is one of the main aspects of the pragmatist theory of knowledge.

Dewey includes in the concept of experience also the uncertainty of existence ex-

perienced by man, his ignorance, dreams, subconsciousness, etc., finally identifying experience with nature and history to make a sign of equality between experience and reality.

The role of experience is emphasized at the cost of the part played in knowledge by reason. This is shown, above all, in the understanding of the nature and function of concepts and thinking, and in the relationship to formal logic.

Emphasis on practical activity is seen everywhere in pragmatist philosophy: it can be found in Dewey's plans for reconstruction, in James's and Dewey's "instrumental" conception of ideas, or in Dewey's "experimentalist" point of view, etc.

The whole pragmatist view on the relation between theory and practice is characterized by a preference for practice. It is on the concept of practice that pragmatism bases its main principles. The chief part is assigned to practice even in the relation to truth; practice, conceived in a pragmatist way, not only verifies the truth, it also creates it.

If we observe closer what pragmatists mean by practice, we find that they identify practice with experience. Practice is converted into mental events, into sense-experience.

Pragmatism emphasizes the volitional aspect of the subject. The pragmatist outlook on the world is voluntarist. Practice is then the activity that serves people to change the manageable world according to their will and wish.

As a philosophy of practical life, pragmatism is also a philosophy of success. Since the pragmatist view on man is biologicistic, practice, too, is understood as the biological activity of the organism. After all, success lies in vital utility.

Practical consideration also dominates in pragmatist psychology and pedagogy.

There is a certain tendency to neglect the class elements of practice. According to Dewey, practice includes every sort of activity that extends and secures all vital values.

Pragmatists defend themselves against interpreting their view on the relation between theory and practice as an underestimate of theory. In reality, however, the pragmatist orientation on concreteness, facts, action and power is accompanied by a tendency to improvisation not based on theory, and to practicalism.

The fourth chapter, Pragmatist Conception of Truth, shows that the concept of truth occupies a central position in pragmatism. The character of this concept is empirist, utilitarian, instrumentalist and, at the same time, hypothetical. Truth need not lie in the relation between our experiences and a model or something that is transempiric. Our ideas may be only symbols, not copies of many realities (James). Scientific conceptions are mere systems of hypotheses (Dewey). Truth lies in the agreement of some mental events (sensations, perceptions, images, thoughts) with other mental events (sensations, perceptions, images, thoughts). Here the main emphasis is given by pragmatists to the agreement with sense-data.

Reason is experimental intelligence (Dewey), the task of reason is to "reconstruct" action, to correct it and to improve it. Truth is not the inner quality of an idea, but it "happens to an idea" (James), theories and ideas cannot be deceptive by themselves but in their use or application (Dewey). The process of applying an idea is, at the same time, a verification, and such a verification is understood not only in the ordinary meaning of the word as "a test of truth" but also in the sense of "the making of truth".

The truth of an idea is verified by success (for which the following terms are also chosen: benefit, profit, advantage, proving good, satisfaction, etc.). The content of the term "success" is not specified, but pragmatist conceptions make it possible to conclude that this concept of success is identical with the concept of satisfactory sense-experience. Theoretically speaking, success lies in a satisfactory unique experience.

After all, the extent of real success must be judged by emotions, which are inseparably connected with instincts. So the final criterion of truth is not "success" itself but emotion and instinct, a biological factor.

The content of a notion is, according to pragmatism, nothing but a subjective human creation.

The criterion of truth is a concern of the individual's "self", and the verifying experience is unique; from this the view of the "plurality of truths" is concluded.

According to pragmatism, truth is a process, but it is absolutely non-static. Abso-

lute truth is, according to James, something separated from the process of knowledge. Absolute truth has, in his opinion, no links with relative truths.

Relativism and its view on knowledge is in pragmatism connected with agnosticism and scepticism. Relativism is also seen in the pragmatist conception of morality as well as in the conception of progress.

The pragmatist conception of the concreteness of truth rests on the viewpoint of absolute changeability of truth, on ignoring the continuative aspect of the process of knowledge.

The theoretical basis of the pragmatist approach to the problem of causality is pragmatist empiricism and pluralism, the latter with indeterminist consequences in pragmatism.

The tendency of not recognizing the objective certainty of knowledge leads to the pragmatist view of probability.

The fifth chapter, Pragmatism and Some Questions of the Methodology of Science, analyses the import of pragmatism for the methodology of sciences. It is, first of all, operationalism, where there are elements of neopositivism, but the main features of which are pragmatist.

The operational method, which is based on the formula that by any concept we mean nothing more than a set of operations, was elaborated from certain elements of the pragmatic method. The principle of operationalism was anticipated in Peirce's essay *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*. Peirce said that the sole meaning of the idea of an object is to be acted upon in a particular way. This statement of Peirce was accepted and elaborated by other classical representatives of American pragmatism, by James and especially by Dewey. Operationalism was finally formulated and applied to physics by the American physicist P. W. Bridgman. Operationalism has also been made use of in some other fields of American science: in biology, in psychology, while there have been even trials to apply it to sociology. In psychology operationalism has played an important part in the behaviourist, pragmatically inclined school.

The principal features of the operationalist method are shown in the last chapter as illustrated by the views of E. C. Tolman – the main leader of modern behaviourism. In operationalism, as in pragmatism, experience is emphasized, being taken as active but not reflectionary in character.

Operationalism studies the relations between conditions in the experiment, substituting the category of condition for that of cause. The factors conditioning the experimentally investigated phenomena are stated according to the pragmatic criterion of convenience. These factors are defined by means of operations carried out in experimental inquiry. The introduction of the operationalist method into the behaviourist trend of psychology was a significant contribution to its modernization.

The conclusion of the work pays attention to the fate of pragmatism in our time. Although the "golden age of American philosophy", in which it had a conspicuous share, has passed and pragmatism is no longer the prevailing philosophical trend in the U.S.A., its influence still remains. The followers of pragmatism continue to make efforts to strengthen its position by modernizing and combining it with other philosophical trends, recently especially with existentialism.

Pragmatism cannot be classified only as a kind of empiricist philosophy, or as a variety of the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), or as a sequel to conventionalism. The pragmatism of the American philosophers is a new and specific philosophical path, though it is connected with some important trends in European philosophical thinking. The originality of pragmatism consists mainly in fact that it makes an original synthesis of elements included in European philosophy – elements of empiricism, of the practical point of view and of an anthropological orientation.

In pragmatism some important problems such as the questions of truth and purposive action, of man's activity, his initiative, efficiency etc. are emphasized. But neither the pragmatist mode of setting out these problems nor the pragmatist mode of dealing with them are acceptable. Their scientific elaboration in philosophy and other social sciences can be based on a Marxist view only, as opposed to pragmatism.

**Translated by J. Ondráček**