

A LAYMAN'S SURVEY OF PRAGMATISM

實用主義之商榷

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The term "pragmatism" is derived from the same Greek word *payua*, meaning action, from which the words "practice" and "practical" come. It was first introduced into philosophy by the American philosopher Mr. Charles Pierce in 1878. In an article entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January of that year, Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance.

William James (1842-1910), the first full-fledged pragmatist, expanded Pierce's theory, gave it a breath of new life and fitted it out as a particular system of philosophy for the Americans. According to James, there are two essential points about pragmatism. The one is the pragmatic method and the other is the pragmatic notion of truth. The pragmatic method, according to James, is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. In illustration of his pragmatic method, James gives us two well-known examples. One example shows how the pragmatic method can settle metaphysical disputes. James himself has experienced a hot dispute about whether, if a man circles a tree around whose trunk a squirrel is also moving, one can say the man goes around the squirrel. James shows how the answer depends on what is meant by "round". Mean by "going round" that the man is in successive places to north, east, south and west of the squirrel, then he does go around the squirrel. Mean, on the other hand, that the man is behind, then to the right of, then in front of, then to the left of the squirrel, then the man may not actually go round the squirrel since the animal may move simultaneously with the man's movements. James concludes that an argument of this kind, if analyzed, turns out to be a verbal one. In neither case is there

anything fit to quarrel about. The other example shows how the pragmatic method is compatible with many possible results. James asks his reader to view the method as being a corridor in hotel whose doors open into many rooms which contain thinkers involved in a variety of intellectual pursuits. These pursuits may be metaphysical, religious or scientific. James insists that the pragmatic method is neutral regarding the kinds of thoughts going on in the rooms.

The pragmatic notion of truth rejects the idea that truth means the copy of reality. Truth is whatever works satisfactorily. The truth of a notion lies in its practical consequences; a notion is true if it permits the believer to attain "satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience." For instance, God is true because the belief in God works satisfactorily and it is in harmonious relation with other parts of human experience. Whether God exists or not is far from the point of issue.

In the Preface to *Pragmatism*, James refers to a number of other pragmatists, such as John Dewey (American,) F.C.S. Schiller (English), J. Milhaud (French), and Papini (Italian), and he regards pragmatism as a universal movement of the century. Although Schiller preferred to use the name of humanism and Dewey has called his own school of thought "experimentalism" instead of pragmatism," in a larger sense, however, pragmatism may include all of them and the English word "pragmatic" has been particularly linked with the special way of thought of the Americans beginning with those early philosophers like Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

All of the above pragmatists, however, comes together on a number of fundamental principles: the repudiation of anything as absolute or fixed or final, either in human nature or nature; or the substitutions of pluralism for monism; the reference of everything to a context in which it occurs or the overall adoption of the principle of relativity or relateness; the translating of all meanings into terms of doing or undergoing, or the radical rejection of formalism; the judgment of every value, such as the true, the false, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, by its practical consequences.

Being a universal movement of modern times as stated above, pragmatism did not suddenly come out of the blue, but has evolved from many of the recent philosophies of Europe, adapted by the traditional American

spirit for the practical and the realistic. James's maintenance, let's say, that the true value of a proposition or theory lies in its cash-value is equivalent to the attitude of the English empiricists that "knowledge is power." From the works of the pragmatists, esp. those of John Dewey, one can see clearly that Hegel's dialectical method of thesis, antithesis and synthesis has been widely employed: William James first reconciled the conflict between science and religion in the spirit of Hegelian philosophy, and later John Dewey went further with the view that the origin of philosophy lies in an attempt to reconcile two different types of mental products—the everyday matter-of-fact knowledge and the traditional imaginative beliefs. Similarly, pragmatism's emphasis upon practical consequences has its roots in the Englishmen's utilitarianism which measures all goods in terms of use. In a dedication of his work *Pragmatism*, William James said that his fancy liked to picture John Stuart Mill as the leader of pragmatism had he been alive at that time. Indeed, in many phases it is almost difficult for us to distinguish between pragmatism and utilitarianism. On the other hand, pragmatism's dispelling of verbal solution and metaphysical dispute follows the path of the positivism of August Comte. Its emphasis upon particulars and "situations", referring everything to its context is but another name for nominalism. And finally its stress upon the necessity of change and chance variations, upon human will and desires, echoes the voice of Charles Darwin and Friederich Nietzsche.

In addition to a queer combination of western philosophies, pragmatism was supplemented here and there by the early, rudimental form of new sciences, such as biology and psychology. For instance, James regards mind as an instrument in the struggle for survival, the kind of survival aimed at by the wants and ideals of the potential survivor. And, as a result of new discoveries gradually revealed by behavioral and experimental psychology, John Dewey even ventured to say that thought is an organ of response, an instrument of adjustment, of behavior rather than of knowledge. Ideas arise, according to pragmatists, when a living organism in the process of satisfying its wants meets with some difficulty or problem, the solution of which calls for a choice between different courses of action. The idea is a plan for the transformation of the given situation into a more satisfying one. The pragmatists reject the view that an idea existing in the mind is true if it correspond to its extra-mental object. Objects take on meaning in so far as they are perceived as the

means to the satisfaction of some interest or the solution of some problem. For the pragmatists, there are no absolute realities, or they are 'incapable of being known. Such are the elements, both old and new, that constitute the kaleidoscope of pragmatism.

Some Merits and Demerits of Pragmatism

As is stated above, pragmatism as a method represents a medley of the philosophies of the Old World. The dialectic philosophy of Hegel is seen in the treatment of the incompatibility of science and religion and in the reconciliation of the everyday matter-of-fact knowledge and the traditional and imaginative beliefs. The same spirit of utilitarianism which measures all goods in terms of use is seen in the emphasis of practical consequences by the pragmatists. On the other hand, Darwinism plays a large part in it in its stress upon the necessity of change and chance variation. Again its emphasis upon human desire and will as the final test of value is nothing but another name for Darwinism and Nietzscheism and is in the line of philosophy so characteristic of the Teutonic people in the traditional Europe.

A noteworthy contribution made to modern civilization by the pragmatists is that they have strongly championed the spirit of freedom. The American pragmatists might have expressed this freedom of thought early in the American Constitution in which freedom is defined as the capability to think for oneself and to come to the truth by the light of one's own conscience since all pragmatists agree in being freedom lovers, and anti-absolutists, in the sense that they leave their system open at the end for still further growth—they are always the meliorists.

Regarding the notion of truth, the pragmatists conceive truth to mean everywhere not duplication (which, according to the pragmatists, are always impossible) but addition; not the constructing of inner copies of already complete realities, but rather the collaboration with realities so as to bring about a clearer result. This is what they mean by "Truth should have practical consequences." The definition of truth of the pragmatists, "Truth is

whatever is satisfactory," partly aims at using truth as a weapon for the conquest of human happiness, at acquiring certainties for those who are unable to believe anything, for the skeptic-minded and for the sickly-conscienced like William James. Traditionally, truth has been regarded as something serious and rather unhappy. "To tell you the truth," always means "to tell you something disagreeable." The Chinese have always believed that truthful words are unpleasant to the ears. Anyhow, these definitions of truth of the pragmatists have also been attacked by the American scholars recently. One of their questions is, "Practical consequences for whom?" since one man's meat may be another man's poison.

Two instances may help to illustrate the vulnerability of this definition of truth. For example, there are many exaggerated advertisements in this world which may be satisfactory to all and also have practical consequences because, owing to the advertisements, business has been flourishing and lots of people receive benefits from them. But still we know that these ads are no truths. A good film may boast of \$ 10,000,000 cost of production. But actually it may cost only \$ 2,000,000 or so. The ad may attract lots of people to come, who are glad to see such a good movie. The producer may net a good profit because of the ad. Everybody seem to be satisfied and contented with the false ad. It does have practical consequences because it does good both to the movie-goers and the producers. Now, according to the pragmatists, it seems that we are bound to say that the ad is true. If the word 'true' means this, then what epithet should we give to movie ad that states honestly the actual cost of the film production? Should we say that it is the 'copy of reality' or that the ad is 'false'? The other instance is that a white lie out of good will does not mean truth. When a patient has developed tumor in the brain and no medical treatment can be of any avail, the doctor, from the viewpoint of humanity, has to conceal the fact and tell the patient that what he is suffering from is just ordinary headache. The doctor's word does have practical consequence because it gives comfort to the patient. It is satisfactory to both the doctor and the patient and is in harmonious relation with other parts of our experiences. But still his word is no truth. The practical consequence of his word cannot alter the tragedy which is going to happen sooner or later.

Another enigma about pragmatism is its moral philosophy. In an essay

entitled "Moral Reconstruction" John Dewey says, "The bad man is the man who no matter how good he has been is beginning to deteriorate, to grow less good. The good man is the man who no matter how morally unworthy he has been is moving to be good." This is a kind of rather precarious morality. Man will tend to be irresponsible if absolution comes too easily. Strictly speaking, man should be responsible for whatever he has done. If there is no higher judge above, we must do justice to ourselves. According to Buddhism, the unholy should be condemned to transmigration through many existences. But people in the present world, whether Buddhists or Christians, can not very well believe in an after-life. This pragmatic notion of morality is probably given as a special tonic for all the presumably degraded people of the modern world.

It is obvious that there can be no miraculous transmutation from evil to good. For instance, you can not expect building friendship with someone whom you have continually cheated and then suddenly announced that you have changed mind and are willing to befriend him. Nine out of ten he will continue to shun you despite of your sincerity and the willingness to make up for your wrongs. It is true that you have then become friendly in your own heart and before God, but you won't look so friendly in the eye of the world, particularly that of the other party. In most cases, to undo some wrong means to reverse the whole process of doing it. And before you have done this, you can hardly expect something to your credit.

The greatest merit of pragmatism, I believe, lies in its epitomology. According to William James, there is no such thing as absolute reality. Objects take on meaning in so far as they are perceived as the means to some interest or the solution of some problem. The complete reality may be likened to a marble stone with which the artist of consciousness may chip it into any form of a sculpture through the continual process of modelling and being remodelled between the organism and its environments. Thus in the theory of evolution the pragmatists have put equal emphasis upon the individual as well as its environment. They recognize the strength of will-power as well as the necessity of adaption to their surroundings. This very attitude accounts for their effectiveness in leading a successful life in a highly competitive world.

Pragmatism and the Traditional Philosophy of China

The whole process of civilization may be interpreted, perhaps, in terms of doing and undoing, just like peace and war alternate with each other, with expected progress in spiral shape like that of the heavenly bodies. Is not what we call the emancipation of women in recent centuries a complete reverse of what our ancestors ever labored to do in the old days? In the ancient times man was dissatisfied with the disorderliness of the growing community and the changeableness of both natural and social phenomena; hence, great efforts were made along the line of seeking unity and a constant and universal law which they called the 'truth'. Although changeableness was highly esteemed in some of the Chinese classics such as *Book of Changes*, inconstancy was generally regarded as a great evil by most of the ordinary people in China who believe that there is an evil spirit called "Inconstancy", the very sight of whom is sure to bring you bad fortune. On the other hand, truth (called 'Tao' by the ancient people of China) was regarded as something sacred to be pursued even at the cost of one's precious life. Confucius was reported to have said, "If one could know Truth in the morning, one may well be satisfied to die in the evening."

Pragmatism, whose keynotes are flexibility and pluralism, inevitably pits against the traditional monistic philosophy of China. But thesis and antithesis usually result in a synthesis. The traditional monistic Chinese philosophy which has long fettered the improvement of science has been in need of being modified by the typical western philosophy of American pragmatism, which, in turn, must be harnessed by the idealism of the traditional Chinese philosophy well represented by the famous saying of Tung Chung Shu of the Han Dynasty, "Straighten out matters for righteousness and do not ask about the gains; clear the path for Truth and do not worry about its practical consequences," and by the well-known admonition of Confucius "Do not do to others which you do not want others to do to you."⁽¹⁾

In contrast with the traditional philosophy of the Chinese, it clearly shows that the philosophy of the pragmatists is too fluid while the ideals of the Chinese scholars too rigid. One of the morals of the Confucianists is "Never shift your anger to the wrong one or in the wrong direction," which is evid-

ently against the principle of adjustment advocated by the pragmatists. We certainly debase ourselves if we shift our anger to our friends when we are trapped by our stronger adversaries. But is it possible that we can response to every stimulus in the same direction, of the same character and in the same amount? Just like the case with our daily life, if we are irritated by some ignorant people we may assuage our anger by kicking a football in the playground or beating an opponent in a chess game. It is necessary therefore to blend the principle of adjustment and the philosophy of the Confucianists.

Another big difference between pragmatism and the traditional Chinese philosophical ideas is that the main current of Chinese philosophy is generally in favor of resting in the highest goodness instead of the everchanging fluidity of the pragmatists. According to the pragmatists, goodness is not goodness in itself but the moving towards goodness; hence, a permanent struggle without rest. The Chinese philosophers think that wisdom comes from a tranquil repose while the pragmatists hold that that thinking arises out of difficulties, and is a kind of action itself. Because of the industrial revolution, change has been highly valued. But does the world need change all the time? A tranquil repose is always necessary.

Yet the most significant difference between pragmatism and the traditional philosophy of China is that the former emphasizes the importance of means while the latter always put forth high-sounding ends without proper means to achieve them. The Chinese ethics strongly advocates both humanity and righteousness, but how to achieve those ideals on the part of each person is a big question. The ends being set, the means are still to be found. On the other hand, the pragmatists generally center their attention upon the means instead of the ends. They implied here and there that means and means alone justify the end. The means must lie within the realm of attainment. Don't try to step from the bottom to the top step. Take them one by one and you get to the top

(1) It seems to me that this is a more thoughtful advice than the Bible's "Do to others which you do not want others to do to you." Because always the question is "How can you be certain that others want you to do the thing for them, esp. when the 'others' may be 'ladies' instead of 'gentlemen'. People of the West can hardly see this point since their philosophy is 'to do' instead of 'not to do'.

from which you may build a new staircase. All progress has been by finding and promoting the means, not the ends. The ends, according to the pragmatists, are subject to change or modification when the means to them are impractical.

Here we can see obviously that either of the two systems of philosophy is incomplete and is in need of supplement of the other one. Without correct and rigid ends, means can serve no useful or good purposes. Without proper control, they may do us harm instead of doing us good. On the other hand, pure and lofty ends become castles in the air without practical means to achieve them. Hence the practical means of the pragmatists must be geared to the well-conceived ethical ends of the Chinese philosophy, such as those described in "The Great Commonwealth", one of the chapters of *Li Chi*: "When the great doctrine prevails, the world will belong to the public...everyone will work to the utmost of their strength, not necessarily for selfish purposes....", or the characteristic philosophies for scholars and gentlemen which demand them to swim against the tides for the sake of righteousness, to love Truth, to be modest in one's wishes and desires, and to do benevolence without thinking of being returned, to take interest in beauty and art and identify oneself with Nature and Universe, to learn to live in peace and harmony without struggling against each other. These ethical ends did not, I think, mysteriously come out of the blue, neither are they hypocrisies, but the distil of wisdom which have been hammered out of everyday experience through thousands of years. The practical means to such ends have either been lost together with the traditional ways of life or have never been clearly set down, are now being renovated with the help of pragmatism.

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