

## **Pragmatism in Philosophy of Education: A Contemporary Outlook**

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### **Abstract**

Various schools of thought and philosophical systems have originated in philosophy in the course of time. One popular philosophy in the modern period is pragmatism. The core pragmatic maxim consists in a rule for clarifying the meaning of hypotheses by tracing their ‘practical consequences’ – their implications for experience in specific situations. The thrust of this paper is to analyse pragmatism, especially the contributions of Dewey, Addams and William James. The study employed the qualitative research design. Data was derived from secondary sources comprising books, journals, scholarly papers and the internet. The expository and evaluative methods are employed for analysis. This study discovered that pragmatism has produced a distinctive epistemological outlook: a fallibilist, anti-Cartesian explication of the norms that govern inquiry. Within that broad outlook, though, early pragmatists split significantly over questions of realism broadly conceived – essentially, whether pragmatism should conceive itself as a scientific philosophy holding monism about truth following Peirce, or a more broad-based alethic pluralism following James and Dewey. What is important is that pragmatism has influenced America and different parts of the world in many ways and deserves further inquiry in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism, Philosophy, Education, Contemporary, Inquiry

### **Introduction**

During the first quarter of the 20th century, pragmatism was the most influential philosophy in the United States, exerting an impact on the study of law, education, political and social theory, art, and religion. Pragmatism’s key ideas originated in discussions at a so-called ‘Metaphysical Club’ that met in Harvard around 1870. Peirce and James participated in these discussions along with some other philosophers, psychologists and philosophically inclined lawyers. Peirce then developed these ideas in publications from the 1870s, and they achieved prominence through a series of public lectures given by James in 1898. Both James and Peirce used ‘pragmatism’ as the name of a method, principle, or ‘maxim’ for clarifying concepts

and hypotheses and for identifying empty disputes, though we shall see significant differences in how they understood it. This paper seeks to analyse the philosophy of pragmatism and its influence on the philosophy of education and other fields of philosophy.

### **What is Pragmatism?**

By etymology, the word pragmatism is derived from the Greek *pragma* meaning “action”. Pragmatism is a school of philosophy that is based on the principle that the usefulness, workability, and practicality of ideas, policies, and proposals are the criteria of their merit (Haack 115). It stresses the priority of action over doctrine, of experience over fixed principles, and it holds that ideas borrow their meanings from

their consequences and their truths from their verification. Thus, ideas are essentially instruments and plans of action (117).

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that, very broadly, understands knowing the world as inseparable from agency within it. This general idea has attracted a remarkably rich and at times, contrary range of interpretations, including: that all philosophical concepts should be tested via scientific experimentation, that a claim is true if and only if it is useful (relatedly: if a philosophical theory does not contribute directly to social progress then it is not worth much), that experience consists in transacting with rather than representing nature, that articulate language rests on a deep bed of shared human practices that can never be fully 'made explicit' (Goodman 162).

In the philosophy of education, the notion that children learn by doing, that critical standards of procedure and understanding emerge from the application of concepts to directly experienced subject matters, has been called "pragmatic."

### **Evolution of Pragmatism**

Pragmatism has a long history of evolution in Philosophy. One could trace its origin to the ancient period. The Greek historian Polybius (118 BCE) called his writings "pragmatic," meaning thereby that they were intended to be instructive and useful to his readers (Stuhr 88). In his introduction to *Philosophy of History*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) commented on this "pragmatical" approach as the second kind of reflective historiography. As the American psychologist and leading pragmatist William James remarked, "The term is derived from the same Greek word *pragma* meaning action, from which the words 'practice' and 'practical' come." The American logician Charles S. Peirce, another pioneering pragmatist, may have been the first to use the word to designate a

specific philosophical doctrine. But Peirce had Immanuel Kant's German term rather than the Greek word in mind. *Pragmatisch* refers to experimental, empirical, and purposive thought "based on and applying to experience." Within linguistics, "pragmatics" refers to the subfield that studies the relation of the language user to the words or other signs being used.

In modern times, Pragmatism originated in the United States around 1870, and now presents a growing third alternative to both analytic and 'Continental' philosophical traditions worldwide. Its first generation was initiated by the so-called 'classical pragmatists' Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who first defined and defended the view, and his close friend and colleague William James (1842–1910), who further developed and ably popularized it (Thayer 91). During this initial period, pragmatists focused significantly on theorising inquiry, meaning and the nature of truth, although James put these themes to work exploring truth in religion.

A second (still termed 'classical') generation turned pragmatist philosophy more explicitly towards politics, education and other dimensions of social improvement, under the immense influence of John Dewey (1859–1952) and his friend Jane Addams (1860–1935) – who invented the profession of social work as an expression of pragmatist ideas. Hanging statement

Also, of considerable importance at this time was George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who contributed significantly to the social sciences, developing pragmatist perspectives upon the relations between the self and the community (Bernstein 68). As the resulting progressive Deweyan 'New Deal' era passed away and the US moved into the Cold War, pragmatism's influence was challenged, as analytic philosophy blossomed and became the dominant

methodological orientation in most Anglo-American philosophy departments. Transitional or 'third generation' figures included C.I. Lewis and W.V.O. Quine; although these philosophers developed a number of pragmatist themes, their analytic allegiance may be seen in their significant focus on theory of knowledge as first philosophy, which Dewey deprecated as 'the epistemological industry' (Hoopes 97).

### Major Theses of Pragmatism

Six fundamental theses of pragmatism developed with varying interpretations by the major pragmatists are:

- i. *Nature of Reality:* Responsive to idealism and evolutionary theory, pragmatists emphasized the "plastic" nature of reality and the practical function of knowledge as an instrument for adapting to reality and controlling it. Existence is fundamentally concerned with action, which some pragmatists exalted to an almost metaphysical level. Change being an inevitable condition of life, pragmatists called attention to the ways in which change can be directed for individual and social benefit. They were consequently most critical of moral and metaphysical doctrines in which change and action are relegated to the "merely practical," on the lowest level of the hierarchy of values. Some pragmatists anticipated the more concrete and life-centred philosophy of existentialism by arguing that only in acting, confronted with obstacles, compelled to make choices, and concerned with giving form to experience, is the individual's being realized and discovered (Levi 51).
- ii. *Priority of Actual Experience:* Pragmatism is a continuation of critical empiricism in emphasizing the priority of actual experience over fixed principles and a priori (nonexperiential) reasoning in critical investigation. For James this meant that the pragmatist:  
Turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action....It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against...dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth (81).
- iii. *The Pragmatic Meaning of Idea and Belief:* The pragmatic meaning of an idea, belief, or proposition is said to reside in the distinct class of specific experimental or practical consequences that result from the use, application, or entertainment of the notion. As Peirce commented, "Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects" (102). For example, two propositions for which no different effects can be discerned have merely a verbal appearance of dissimilarity, and a proposition for which no definite theoretical or practical consequences can be determined is pragmatically meaningless. For pragmatists, "there is no

- distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.” Meaning thus has a predictive component, and some pragmatists came close to identifying the meaning of a term or proposition with the process of its verification (Deegan 108).
- iv. *The Pragmatic Meaning of Truth:* While most philosophers have defined truth in terms of a belief’s “coherence” within a pattern of other beliefs or as the “correspondence” between a proposition and an actual state of affairs, pragmatism, in contrast, generally held that truth, like meaning, is to be found in the process of verification. Thus, truth simply is the verification of a proposition, or the successful working of an idea. Crudely, truth is “what works.” Less crudely and more theoretically, truth is, in Peirce’s words, the “limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief.” For John Dewey, the founder of the instrumentalist school of pragmatism, these are beliefs “warranted” by inquiry (Hoopes 119).
- v. *Instrumentalism:* In keeping with their understanding of meaning and truth, pragmatists interpreted ideas as instruments and plans of action. In contrast to the conception of ideas as images and copies of impressions or of external objects, pragmatist theories emphasized the functional character of ideas: ideas are suggestions and anticipations of possible conduct; they are hypotheses or forecasts of what will result from a given action; they are ways of organizing behaviour in the world rather than replicas of the world. Ideas are thus analogous in some respects to tools; they are efficient, useful, and valuable, or not, depending on the role that they play in contributing to the successful direction of behavior (120).
- vi. *Methodology:* In methodology, pragmatism was a broad philosophical attitude toward the formation of concepts, hypotheses, and theories and their justification. For pragmatists, the individual’s interpretations of reality are motivated and justified by considerations of their efficacy and utility in serving his interests and needs. The molding of language and theorizing are likewise subject to the critical objective of maximum usefulness according to humanity’s various purposes (Bernstein 216).

### **John Dewey’s Pragmatism**

John Dewey situates his theory of pragmatism within his concept of instrumentalism. Dewey’s instrumentalism is geared towards humanistic naturalism which offers an argument for a reconsideration of the place of man in the world through some adjustment in the practice of science (36). Hence, Dewey’s instrumentalism contravenes the scientific realism which upholds that physical theories are the best account of reality. Dewey, thereby, criticizes a society that limits science to physical matter. In such a society, according to him, knowledge is divided

against itself, for the human disciplines are separated from physical sciences (Eldridge 83). This allows technology to play its part in generating enslavement of men, women and children in factories in which they are animated machine to tend inanimate machines.

On the other hand, Dewey's philosophy is a cultural instrumentalism which tends to situate thought within society and history. In this regard, Dewey envisaged that science is to be integrated into the realm of values when it is used to bring about the things we value (115). Scientific explorations should be geared towards solving human problems in the society. Dewey thought that philosophy would come unto its own when it paid attention to human problems in the society by improving the intellectual tools used by human to solve their problems. Thus, Dewey's pragmatic instrumentalism can serve as a sole model of practicing science in the advanced economies of Europe and America as well as developing countries of Africa.

There are several implications of John Dewey's pragmatism on scientific discovery. Scientific and technological inventions arise when a society has an unfulfilled need (Gale 99). Dewey's humanistic instrumentalism advocates that scientific discovery is geared to serve human essence. Scientific innovations that were inimical to the well-being of man should not be promoted. It is evident that Dewey's instrumentalism is not a proto-positivist **the** sought to reduce meaning to scientific procedure. The instrumentality becomes a master and works fatally as if possessed of a will of its own not because it has a will but because man has not" (Burriss 102).

Dewey's instrumentalism is relevant for the industrialized economies to integrate value into the practice of science. Dewey opposes scientific realism which holds that physical theories are the best account of all reality to the various types of idealism

which portrays the view that truth, beauty, good have "Being" beyond the temporal existence of the common sense world or the world of science (Dewey 33-36). On this note, Africa and other developing countries need pragmatic ideology to change their conservative world-views that impede freedom to radical thinking and invention. Therefore, Dewey's anthropomorphic naturalism also can serve as a model of practicing science in developing countries like Nigeria in order to transform our traditional conservative world-views that militates against scientific development. The scientific method of experimentation is embedded on pragmatic principle of workability of an idea or a theory in practice. Thus, pragmatic education is necessary for scientific development of Third World countries.

Dewey rejected the idea of conceiving the human being as a spectator in the space of learning. This is encapsulated in his popular "Spectator Theory". In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey described the main problem of modern philosophy as follows, "How is science to be accepted and yet the realm of values to be conserved" (82). Dewey always held that the goal of knowing cannot be severed from the process of inquiry or the means by which the end of inquiry is achieved. He suggested that a solution to the problem would be found if the separation of theory and practice, presupposed by philosophy since the days of Plato, were overcome. That task, he believed, will be accomplished when the traditional spectator theory of knowledge is replaced by a theory that regards the knower of the world as an agent in that world. Such a theory will be a theory not of knowledge as fixed and immutable but rather of knowledge as the upshot of inquiry as seen in the experimental sciences; it will, he promised, "cancel the isolation of knowledge from overt action." Once knowledge is seen to be not only compatible

with action but requiring action, it follows that the methods of inquiry that lead to knowledge in science are also the methods by which judgments of practice, and hence judgments of value, become known.

### **Jane Addams's Pragmatism**

Jane Addams (1860–1935) was a central figure in the development of pragmatist thought. In her lifetime, Addams was revered as one of America's most famous social reformers, the founder of Hull House and the recipient of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize. Her pragmatist philosophies emerged from her experiences working in the poverty-stricken immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago, from her collaborations with the talented women who lived at Hull House, as well from reflection on texts and direct dialogue with philosophers of her time (including John Dewey, William James, Leo Tolstoy, and W.E.B. DuBois). Addams published eleven books and hundreds of essays, writing on ethics, social philosophy, and pacifism, in addition to analyzing social issues concerning women, industrialization, immigration, urban youth, and international mediation (Hamington 171).

Jane Addams applied the pragmatist principles in her work as the founding of Social Work and Social Ethics. Addams's contributions were instrumental in achieving social reform in the USA and improving equality between men and women at the beginning of the twentieth century. She established one of the main pragmatists' precepts, which does not separate philosophy from the rest of the areas of life. She linked philosophy with political and social movements, the same as with William James and John Dewey, but in its radical form (Cracraft 83).

Addams modeled the use of pragmatism as a foundation for social and political thinking. To understand the development of Addams's pragmatism, it is important to examine the political and social

context of her time from a gender perspective. Other pragmatists, such as James, Peirce and Dewey, are considered major or minor *masculine* figures in philosophy, science, education and politics. However, Addams is seen as something of a novelty, one of those "exceptional women."

Like Dewey, Addams believed in comprehensive understanding, that is, linking diverse fields of human expression that had been segregated and divided into polarizing dichotomies as a result of either hyper-specialization or a lack of points of connection among different disciplines. Addams believed that society and art are interrelated, suggesting an aesthetic component to human understanding and social justice. The material expression of this concept was *Hull House*, the incarnation of her most altruistic ideals for a just society.

Addams' philosophy combined feminist sensibilities with an unwavering commitment to social improvement through cooperative efforts. Although she sympathized with feminists, socialists, and pacifists, Addams refused to be labeled. This refusal was pragmatic rather than ideological. Addams' commitment to social cohesion and cooperation prompted her to eschew what she perceived as divisive distinctions. Active democratic social progress was so essential to Addams that she did not want to alienate any group of people from the conversation or from the participation necessary for effective inclusive deliberation. Addams carefully varied her rhetorical approach to engage a variety of constituencies, which makes the identification of her social philosophy challenging. Accordingly, Addams did not intend to engage in philosophical narratives removed from social improvement, but neither did she intend to pursue social activism without theorizing about the wider implications of her work. In this respect, through her integration of theory and action,

Addams carried pragmatism to its logical conclusion, developing an applied philosophy immersed in social action.

### **Pragmatism, according to William James**

When William James published a series of lectures on “Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking” in 1907, he began by identifying ‘The Present Dilemma in Philosophy’ (1907: 9ff), a fundamental and apparently irresolvable clash between two ways of thinking, which he promised pragmatism would overcome (11). James begins by observing that the history of philosophy is ‘to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments’: the ‘tough-minded’ and the ‘tender-minded’. The tough-minded has an empiricist commitment to experience and going by ‘the facts’, while the tender-minded prefer *a priori* principles which appeal to ratiocination. The tender-minded tends to be idealistic, optimistic and religious, believing in free will, while the tough-minded are materialist, pessimistic, irreligious, dogmatic and fatalistic (80).

Pragmatism is presented by James as the ‘mediating philosophy’: here, we need to show how adherence to tough-minded epistemic standard does not prevent our adopting the kind of worldview to which the tender-minded aspire. Once we use what he introduced as the ‘pragmatic method’ to clarify our understanding of truth, of free will, or of religious belief, the disputes, which we despaired of settling intellectually, begin to dissolve (18). William James thus presented pragmatism as a “method for settling metaphysical disputes that might otherwise be interminable” (28). The tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a

practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare (29).

### **Influence of Pragmatism on Philosophy of Education**

Pragmatism had a huge influence on philosophy of education. Peirce had some insightful things to say about pedagogy which anticipate today’s ‘inquiry-based learning’ and ‘research-led teaching’, but they are scattered across his writings (Haack 109). The giant figure in philosophy of education is of course Dewey, who pioneered and established it as a separate sphere of study when he first assumed the chair in Philosophy at University of Chicago in 1894. Dewey’s career coincided with a period in which North America’s population was rapidly growing, industrializing and urbanizing, shifting education delivery out of the home into public institutions, and his ideas had enormous impact. Many of his suggestions derive from his vision of democracy as not merely a system of voting but the idea that every societal institution might be designed to foster maximum flourishing in every citizen. Viewed from this angle, traditional modes of schooling whereby teachers deliver an approved (often employer-sanctioned) set of facts for children to memorise count as despotic. Instead the emphasis should be on enabling children to grow from within, according to their present interests and capabilities, and become lifelong learners, although Dewey equally criticises certain romantic, ‘child-centred’ educational theorists of his day for neglecting to direct or guide the child’s interests in any particular direction (Hildebrand 127). It is also worth noting that Dewey sees education as primarily a social not an individual process since, as noted above, he views human identity formation as irremediably social.

The result is a ‘problem-centred pedagogy’ which looks to pragmatist

epistemology as a the theory of inquiry. The teacher begins by facilitating contact with some phenomena which prove genuinely puzzling to the students, then guides them through a cycle of inquiry which (if all goes well) resolves the problematic situation to the satisfaction of all present. This cycle of inquiry includes as stages: articulating the problem and questions which might need to be answered in its resolution, gathering data, suggesting hypotheses which might potentially resolve the problem, and testing or otherwise evaluating those hypotheses. Opening up the classroom to such 'live' thinking generates unpredictability which can be challenging for the teacher to manage, but if the genuine indeterminacy of the problematic situation can be successfully navigated, the reward will be students who have learned not just how to *know*, but how to *think*. In that regard, Dewey claimed that his writings on education summed up his entire philosophical position (Popp 231). For Dewey, all philosophy was philosophy of education. (Incomplete position of Dewey).

Finally, some pragmatist fundamentals such as the holistic vision of the human being, the paradox of separating "knowing from doing", and giving the *usefulness* of the activity and knowledge primacy in the process of human development, inspired the profession of Occupational Therapy in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### Conclusion

Pragmatism is an interesting and attractive philosophy which has contributed so much towards the growth of modern science and technology. But, one of the loopholes of this scientific philosophy is that it lays so much emphasis on practice. Practice cannot work without theory. Theory is very important because it lays the foundation on which the practice of science is embellished. Indeed, John Dewey and other American pragmatic philosophers lay so much emphasis on

scientific knowledge. But, restricting human knowledge mainly to scientific knowledge is somehow wrong because science alone may not proffer all the solutions to human problems in the society. Other forms of knowledge like revealed or mystical knowledge are important to complement human effort. So, there is the need for man to strike a balance between science and religion in his quest to understand the role of man in the universe or cosmos.

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