A Companion to Pragmatism

Edited by
John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis
A Companion to Pragmatism
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31 A Companion to Ancient Philosophy
    Edited by Mary Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin
32 A Companion to Pragmatism
    Edited by John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis
33 A Companion to Nietzsche
    Edited by Keith Ansell Pearson
34 A Companion to Socrates
    Edited by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachanar Kantekar
35 A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism
    Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall
A Companion to Pragmatism

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Contents

List of Contributors viii
Preface x
Notes on Abbreviations xi
Introduction: Pragmatism, Retrospective, and Prospective 1
  Joseph Margolis

Part I  MAJOR FIGURES 11
1 Charles Sanders Peirce 13
  Vincent M. Colapietro
2 William James 30
  Ellen Kappy Suckiel
3 F. C. S. Schiller and European Pragmatism 44
  John R. Shook
4 John Dewey 54
  Philip W. Jackson
5 George Herbert Mead 67
  Gary A. Cook
6 Jane Addams 79
  Marilyn Fischer
7 Alain L. Locke 87
  Leonard Harris
8 C. I. Lewis 94
  Murray G. Murphey
9 W. V. Quine 101
  Roger F. Gibson, Jr.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hilary Putnam</td>
<td><em>Harvey J. Cormier</em></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Jürgen Habermas</td>
<td><em>Joseph M. Heath</em></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Richard Rorty</td>
<td><em>Kai Nielsen</em></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Not Cynicism, but Synechism: Lessons from Classical Pragmatism</td>
<td><em>Susan Haack</em></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Peirce and Cartesian Rationalism</td>
<td><em>Douglas R. Anderson</em></td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>James, Empiricism, and Absolute Idealism</td>
<td><em>Timothy L. S. Sprigge</em></td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hegel and Realism</td>
<td><em>Kenneth R. Westphal</em></td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Dewey, Dualism, and Naturalism</td>
<td><em>Thomas M. Alexander</em></td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Expressivism and Mead’s Social Self</td>
<td><em>Mitchell Aboulafia</em></td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Marxism and Critical Theory</td>
<td><em>Paulo Ghiraldelli, Jr.</em></td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Philosophical Hermeneutics</td>
<td><em>David Vessey</em></td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Language, Mind, and Naturalism in Analytic Philosophy</td>
<td><em>Bjørn T. Ramberg</em></td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td><em>Shannon W. Sullivan</em></td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Pluralism, Relativism, and Historicism</td>
<td><em>Joseph Margolis</em></td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Experience as Freedom</td>
<td><em>John J. McDermott</em></td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism</td>
<td><em>Richard Rorty</em></td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Intelligence and Ethics</td>
<td><em>Hilary Putnam</em></td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Part II  TRANSFORMING PHILOSOPHY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Not Cynicism, but Synechism: Lessons from Classical Pragmatism</td>
<td><em>Susan Haack</em></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Peirce and Cartesian Rationalism</td>
<td><em>Douglas R. Anderson</em></td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>James, Empiricism, and Absolute Idealism</td>
<td><em>Timothy L. S. Sprigge</em></td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hegel and Realism</td>
<td><em>Kenneth R. Westphal</em></td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Dewey, Dualism, and Naturalism</td>
<td><em>Thomas M. Alexander</em></td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Expressivism and Mead’s Social Self</td>
<td><em>Mitchell Aboulafia</em></td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Marxism and Critical Theory</td>
<td><em>Paulo Ghiraldelli, Jr.</em></td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Philosophical Hermeneutics</td>
<td><em>David Vessey</em></td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Language, Mind, and Naturalism in Analytic Philosophy</td>
<td><em>Bjørn T. Ramberg</em></td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td><em>Shannon W. Sullivan</em></td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Pluralism, Relativism, and Historicism</td>
<td><em>Joseph Margolis</em></td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Experience as Freedom</td>
<td><em>John J. McDermott</em></td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part III  CULTURE AND NATURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism</td>
<td><em>Richard Rorty</em></td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Intelligence and Ethics</td>
<td><em>Hilary Putnam</em></td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

27 Democracy and Value Inquiry
   Ruth Anna Putnam

28 Liberal Democracy
   Robert B. Westbrook

29 Pluralism and Deliberative Democracy: A Pragmatist Approach
   Judith M. Green

30 Philosophy as Education
   Jim Garrison

31 Creativity and Society
   Hans Joas and Erkki Kilpinen

32 Religious Empiricism and Naturalism
   Nancy K. Frankenberry

33 Aesthetics
   Richard Shusterman

34 Aesthetic Experience and the Neurobiology of Inquiry
   Jay Schulkin

35 Cognitive Science
   Mark Johnson

36 Inquiry, Deliberation, and Method
   Isaac Levi

37 Pragmatic Idealism and Metaphysical Realism
   Nicholas Rescher

38 Scientific Realism, Anti-Realism, and Empiricism
   Cheryl J. Misak

Name Index

Subject Index
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This volume of essays on pragmatism presents the highlights of its history, approaching a century and a half duration, and also discusses pragmatism’s main goals as it looks forward to continuing to make a large impact on philosophy. This volume is organized into three sections. Part I, “Major Figures,” provides chapters about a dozen of the most prominent contributors to pragmatic thought. Part II, “Transforming Philosophy,” gathers discussions of ways that pragmatism has raised challenges to rival philosophical views, and also has offered alliances with a variety of philosophers and movements. Part III, “Culture and Nature,” offers chapters which describe how pragmatism can treat a broad range of philosophical topics spanning across ethics, politics, education, social theory, religion, aesthetics, epistemology, cognitive science, philosophy of science, and metaphysics. The chapters’ bibliographies offer extensive guidance to useful further reading.

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to the contributors to this volume, for their enthusiasm for this project and willingness to develop a good fit between their expertise and our vision for the contents. While several topics in the end could not be pursued, and some potential authors could not or would not contribute, we prefer to emphasize how pleased we are at the high quality of the chapters and their overall coherence together. The contributors have made this project very enjoyable and they deserve all of the credit for its considerable scholarly value.

We would like to extend our warmest thanks to Jeff Dean, our editor at Blackwell, for his encouraging support and wise advice at all stages of this project.

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John R. Shook, Joseph Margolis
Notes on Abbreviations

The referencing styles for critical editions and standard collection of writings by Peirce, James, and Dewey are as follows.

Charles S. Peirce


Unpublished manuscripts are referenced by *MS* and a number identifying each manuscript according to Richard S. Robin’s *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967.

William James


*Works ECR*  *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 1987
*Works Eph*  *Essays in Philosophy*, 1978
*Works EPR*  *Essays in Psychical Research*, 1986
## NOTES ON ABBREVIATIONS

| Works EPs | Essays in Psychology, 1983 |
| Works ERE | Essays in Radical Empiricism, 1976 |
| Works ERM | Essays in Religion and Morality, 1982 |
| Works MEN | Manuscript Essays and Notes, 1988 |
| Works MT | The Meaning of Truth, 1975 |
| Works PP | The Principles of Psychology, 3 vols., 1981 |
| Works Prag | Pragmatism, 1975 |
| Works PU | A Pluralistic Universe, 1977 |
| Works SPP | Some Problems of Philosophy, 1979 |
| Works TTP | Talks to Teachers on Psychology, 1983 |
| Works VRE | The Varieties of Religious Experience, 1985 |
| Works WB | The Will to Believe and Other Essays, 1979 |


John Dewey


Introduction: Pragmatism, Retrospective, and Prospective

JOSEPH MARGOLIS

I

Seen retrospectively, pragmatism was the single most important, most inventive, most vigorous, most distinctly American philosophical movement between the end of the Civil War and the end of World War II. It obviously begins with Peirce’s genuinely innovative voice, just at the time the end of the Civil War transforms the United States into a notably vigorous sui generis force – politically, economically, intellectually – within the Eurocentric world. Peirce’s inventive spark was caught up by a pop figure like James, keeping pragmatism vibrant and influential in a way Peirce couldn’t possibly have sustained, in America and abroad. Dewey then made his appearance, approaching pragmatic philosophy from the well-regarded vantage of “neo-Kantian idealism,” as he himself freely admits in his 1925 account of “The Development of American Pragmatism” (LW 2:14). By that time, Dewey had effectively exorcised his own idealism.

Dewey also published Experience and Nature (LW 1) in that same year, but not yet an important run of later books essential to rounding out his conception of the instrumentalist version of pragmatism. He does not, in his account of pragmatism’s development, name himself among the founding figures, but speaks, particularly toward the end of the account, of the “instrumentalists” (or, “instrumentalists and pragmatists”) as if to distinguish his view from Peirce’s and James’s and as if to implicate his own work in a distinct movement that includes others who are also not named. But we know Dewey to be the architect of “instrumentalism,” perhaps most fully worked out, in 1938, with the appearance of Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (LW 2). Dewey’s account does indeed provide an overview close to the beginning of the interval in which he formulates his vision of a completely articulated pragmatism, unifies his sense of the seeming scatter of the themes of the founding figures, and definitely dominates pragmatism to the end of his days. Both Peirce and James had died at least ten years earlier: Peirce in 1914, James in 1910. Peirce’s voluminous journals and unpublished papers were not to appear in published form until the 1930s. In fact, there is little evidence that Peirce’s developed views, apart from the few very early papers mentioned in the overview, ever guided Dewey’s account in a decisive way. Even in the Logic, reference to Peirce is purely formulaic: it could hardly have been briefer. Peirce himself seems
not to have had a very high regard for Dewey’s earlier forays into logical matters – explicitly, for his command of the notion of logical necessity. A discussion of Peirce’s theory of signs does not surface at all until 1948 (LW 15:141–52), a few years before Dewey’s death. Dewey has remarkably little to say about Peirce, though he credits him, quite correctly, with the original emphasis on, and method of explicating, the meaning of a concept. By contrast, James is rather perceptively reviewed: Dewey is doctrinally much closer to James than to Peirce and much more concerned to give a fine-grained account of James’s contribution, which, by and large, he presents in a favorable light, in a way that leads directly to the “instrumentalist’s” unifying conception (that is, his own).

Dewey was much the youngest of the three principal pragmatists, the only one in a position to judge the movement’s final trajectory. He had not yet written any of his most distinctive later books at the time of Peirce’s and James’s deaths; they date approximately from the appearance of Experience and Nature and continue for somewhat more than fifteen years. By the time Peirce’s papers were published, it was much too late for Dewey to begin a close study of his (Peirce’s) contribution. The tale told from Dewey’s vantage is essentially occupied, therefore, with his own use and transformation of James’s themes, well beyond James’s own intentions. It is hardly irrelevant to remark that Richard Rorty, having adopted pragmatism in his own distinctive way, has almost nothing to say about Peirce, and what he says is hardly complimentary. In fact, indifference to Peirce’s work apart from the obligatory compliment – among self-styled pragmatists from the 1980s on – is, by now, a badge of honor among the more Rortyan of the Dewey enthusiasts, who tend to read Dewey as having gone far beyond the seeming purpose of his temperate reformulation of James’s appealing intuitions (themselves never fully systematized by James himself). Peirce was viewed by Dewey as less and less a pragmatist after the appearance of his early papers in the 1870s; and James had almost no interest in Peirce’s subtleties beyond those same early accounts. So the picture Dewey provides in the 1925 paper is probably as fair a picture of pragmatism as was possible at that time or from there to the war years of the 1940s, when pragmatism seemed to be coming to an end as the strong movement it had been. But it scants Peirce’s contribution.

Dewey was able to absorb and systematize in a professionally skillful way all the scattered pragmatist themes (salient by 1925) that eventually congealed into that generic conception we now call pragmatism in a relatively settled way. It is now, of course, largely an artifact of Dewey’s executive construction, unified in a distinctly natural way – even beyond Dewey – through the proliferating themes that had separated Peirce, James, and Dewey as much as bound them together within Dewey’s evolving vision. Dewey himself repeatedly characterizes Peirce as a “logician,” James as a “humanist” and “meliorist,” and himself as an “instrumentalist”: all of which seems to signify that Peirce’s contribution to pragmatism lay chiefly with the early papers occupied with the meaning of a concept; that James decisively “expanded” (Dewey’s term) the “pragmatic” side of Peirce along moral, religious, and, especially, optimistic lines of personal belief and commitment; and that Dewey’s own contribution was centered on a future-oriented vision of intelligent life – more Jamesian than Peircean – which, featuring the use of natural science in terms of consequences that a human agent might foresee and thereupon act to effectuate, would enable us to realize
goals anticipated by James (in a way that bore on his theory of truth) but finally recast in the slimmest and least tendentious terms by Dewey himself.

In a distinctly Darwinian spirit, Dewey saw no teleology in nature, except for the deliberately teleologized reading of scientific inquiry that instrumentalism favored. It is here, precisely, that one grasps the sense in which Dewey’s instrumentalism may be said to generalize over the rather piecemeal intuitions that James explores so appealingly though without a clear sense of just how those themes contribute to a unified picture of pragmatism itself. Also, it was only in 1938, when he published his *Logic*, that Dewey bothered to recover (in the most perfunctory way) the minimal theme of Peirce’s fallibilism – which he co-opts – completely shorn of all the subtleties of the “long run,” truth, abduction, transcendental hope, the link between human reason and the vestige of an Idealist’s kind of Reason said to be resident (somehow) in nature at large. (Peirce had explained the idea in terms of nature’s “habit” of taking on increasingly lawlike regularities.) But to recognize pragmatism in these diverse tendencies is to begin to see that, although all three of the classic figures were pragmatists – particularly when collected in Dewey’s own vision – Peirce remains a fallibilist in a complicated and potentially alien way that strongly implicates post-Kantian concerns; James, a meliorist and pluralist in the strongest possible subjective terms that may be thought to bear on personal freedom and belief; and Dewey, an instrumentalist who harmonizes and integrates in the simplest and most plausible way all the disparate threads of pragmatism’s early history that he finds congenial.

Dewey’s retrospective account is actually more preparatory than retrospective. He pays his respects to Peirce, but is content with showing little more than a general congruity between himself and Peirce; which is, indeed, important enough. But he dwells primarily on his relationship to James and shows in a rather detailed way just how he interprets and adapts James’s contribution within his own doctrine. What we learn here is how Dewey views his own emerging way of co-opting James’s innovations, even as he progressively refines the instrumentalist variant of pragmatism. He catches up James’s reflections on topics like the One and the Many, materialism and theism, meliorism, and the expansive conception of truth that dominates James’s most explicitly philosophical effort – as contributing elements within a single conception. Dewey expertly sketches the pragmatist unity of James’s scattered essays in a way James never claimed and never attempted to work out.

For his part, Peirce veered off in directions of inquiry less and less intimately connected with pragmatism’s fortunes, once the nature of pragmatism was stamped so indelibly by James’s originally botched treatment of truth as an extension of Peirce’s account of the meaning of a concept. Peirce was, of course, furious at James’s “inaccurate” rendering of his original doctrine. Nevertheless, if there was to be a pragmatist movement at all, it would have to have yielded in James’s direction before it could have benefited from Dewey’s reconstruction.

It is an irony that, already in the 1870s papers, Peirce had sketched the most pertinent, even the most essential, nerve of James’s theory of truth. But he also thought of reserving his account of truth proper for a more ramified theory of science – in terms, for instance, of the complex version of fallibilism he favored. As a result, he was completely unprepared for James’s (*Works Prag*) rather guileless but well-intentioned
report of his (Peirce’s) “method” – which obviously infected his (that is, Peirce’s own) elaboration of pragmatism (or “pragmaticism”).

There are at least two caveats to be entered here: one, that the theory of truth had to be redeemed from James’s philosophical *faux pas*; the other, that it would be necessary to segregate, in the work of all three figures, what was and was not essential to the general vision we now call pragmatism. For instance, we are inclined to omit (a) the ingenious Kantian cast of Peirce’s most systematic work; (b) what proved impossible to defend in James’s application of his conception of truth; and (c) the vestiges of post-Kantian idealism in Dewey’s early work.

All of the foregoing is retrospective from our present point of view. Of course, pragmatism was unexpectedly revived in a relatively brief interval from the early 1970s to the end of the century in ways more symptomatic of what pragmatism had yet to examine in a doctrinally focused way than as the successful delivery of the fresh strategies needed, explicitly promised in this second phase, but still missing at the end of the century (see Rorty 1982).

II

Now, early in the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a very different setting from that of the role Dewey adopted in 1925. The reason is instructive. Dewey was obviously convinced that he, personally, had to “complete” the picture of pragmatism as a unified and comprehensive theory if it was ever to be brought to full strength. The instrumentalism of the interval from 1925 to the end of Dewey’s life constitutes the one reasonably full account of the unity of the classic period that we have. It could hardly have gone another way. There was no possibility of unifying the work of all three figures until Dewey’s instrumentalism was in play. All that James was prepared to say (or could say), which he said at once in his original California lecture (1898) introducing pragmatism more or less officially, was to acknowledge his debt to Peirce. For his part, Peirce could, as a pragmatist, only fume in print (politely) against James’s wrongful usurpation of the doctrine’s name for a thesis he found impossible to accept – a complete betrayal (he believed) of his original conception. Ultimately, of course, pragmatism’s unity was almost entirely Dewey’s creation; an immense labor assimilating Peirce and James, certainly not a verbal trick.

The second phase of pragmatism hardly adds any new conceptual strategies to classic pragmatism itself. It was largely engaged in a surprisingly prolonged but finally short-lived quarrel between Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty regarding the propriety of reading Dewey along the lines of Rorty’s so-called “postmodernist” account of pragmatism and of Putnam’s counter-effort to reject such innovations in favor of a more canonical picture of realism – cast in metaphysical and epistemological terms strong enough to escape the charge of relativism (see Margolis 2002 for a detailed account of the entire dispute). Rorty’s intention was to retire metaphysics and epistemology altogether, on the plea that such would-be disciplines, essential to canonical philosophy, were actually sham undertakings: there is, and could be, he claimed (1979), speaking as a pragmatist, no science of knowledge as such; hence, no way to demonstrate that (say) realism was true.
The immediate outcome of the quarrel between Putnam and Rorty was to expose Putnam’s inability to vindicate the so-called “internal realism” Putnam espoused – which he eventually acknowledged (Putnam 1987 and 1994). Nevertheless, for his part, Rorty never actually convinced any important discussants of his claims – of the validity of the “postmodernist” (or “pragmatist” or “post-philosophical”) argument – so that they accordingly dismissed philosophical inquiry itself as completely indefensible. Symptomatically, neither Davidson nor Putnam ever yielded. For a sample of the responses to Rorty’s challenge, see Brandom (2000) and Malachowski (1990). If that were all the quarrel signified, it would have been ignored by now. But the fact is, it revivified pragmatism in a most extraordinary way; not gratuitously, it seems, but certainly unexpectedly. The only explanation for its new-found appeal and strength, suddenly perceived even after the exhaustion of the exchange between Rorty and Putnam, must lie with the counterpart admission of the dubious achievements of late analytic philosophy approaching the end of the century: that is, in terms of the perceived inadequacies of the work of figures like W. V. Quine (1960) and Donald Davidson (1986). So that the quarrel, otherwise a minor affair, actually persuaded the academy of the reasonableness of claims like the following: (a) the basic resources and orientation of classic pragmatism were distinctly promising when compared with the salient forms of scientism favored by the analysts; (b) pragmatism might well be strengthened by confronting in its own voice the best strategies of analytic philosophy and its deepest questions; (c) pragmatism was in an excellent position to address, perhaps even to resolve, the standing differences between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy in ways the analysts could never match; and (d) pragmatism’s particular promise lay with its post-Kantian and Hegelian sympathies and intuitions, enhanced by its Darwinian proclivities, in spite of its not having been explicitly cast in precisely those terms. Given the general doldrums of Western philosophy at the turn of the new century, it looks as if the now-minor skirmish between Rorty and Putnam served as a splendid catalyst for the new age. Certainly, it ushers in an entirely new source and prospect of development.

There’s the decisive lesson. Dewey was actively engaged in bringing pragmatism up to full strength at the moment of reviewing what, by 1925, the movement could be said to have accomplished. But, of course, Dewey’s overview was ineluctably colored (as it should have been) by his own instrumentalism, which (you recall) was not yet completely worked out at the moment of review. We, on the other hand, beneficiaries of a serendipity, find ourselves confronted by the heady possibility of a third life for pragmatism – within the purview of the whole of Eurocentric philosophy and a dawning confrontation with the strongest currents of Asian philosophy. In short, if pragmatism is to fulfill its own sanguine claims, it must go global.

III

The truth is, a proper appraisal of pragmatism must be retrospective and prospective at the same time: it would be perfectly reasonable to argue that its best features were already present in its classic phase, though not, admittedly, in a way focused for its continuing strength in the new century. That may be the best lesson of pragmatism’s
abortive second phase. At any rate, we are in a global setting now, a setting in which
pragmatism may have the advantage over both analytic and Continental strategies.

If we look back to the work of the classic pragmatists, we cannot fail to see that
there is a potential muddle at the heart of both Peirce’s and James’s contributions
regarding the meaning of a concept (Peirce) or, more pointedly, the meaning of the
concept, “truth” (James). Peirce regularly escapes the muddle, though it is often invoked,
as by those who view Peirce as a proto-positivist. James’s treatment of truth is much
less secure, indeed often remarkably confused, in the straightforward record of its
painful revisions approaching defensibility. Here, for instance, is a mature (1905)
rendering of Peirce’s explanation of the meaning of a concept – a passage cited, in fact,
by Dewey (in his overview) but never quite precisely or correctly analyzed by Dewey:

\[ \text{a conception, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in}
\text{its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that}
\text{might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct, if one can}
define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or
denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept,}
\text{and there is absolutely nothing more in it. (CP 5.412)} \]

A proto-positivist would probably say that the passage defines the very criterion for
determining the proper meaning of a particular concept. However, Peirce, the first
pragmatist, is offering instead a meta-comment about whatever, in existential circum-
stances, might function acceptably as a criterion of sorts – provisionally, say, in con-
text, or under other such constraints. His account couldn’t have provided determinate
criteria tout court. It is only in the limit of infinite inquiry (as the passage implicitly
makes clear) that the meta-comment could conceivably yield an ideally adequate
criterion, which, in finite time, could never be captured or approximated. Peirce was
too much the pragmatist to have thought otherwise. The account he gives instantly
implicates his fallibilistic doctrine; which, of course, affects the concept of truth as well.
It is precisely that that explains his upset at James’s bungling, and it is that that marks
the exquisite care with which he explains the innovation of his pragmatic method. In
all candor, it is this theme of Peirce’s which James and Dewey fail to acknowledge.

Peirce meant that pragmatism must abandon Cartesianism altogether. Dewey seems
to have missed an essential part of the point, which begins to affect the emphasis of his
own account, in the same overview, of James’s would-be “Peircean” rendering of the
concept of truth. Dewey does indeed proceed in accord with Peirce’s notion, but he
does not seem to realize that he’s conforming more with Peirce’s notion than with
James’s – and that when James himself finally corrects his own analysis of the concept
of truth more or less acceptably, he brings his own account more into accord with
Peirce’s notion than either he or Dewey is aware of. It is true enough that James is
more of a nominalist than Peirce, and it is true that Peirce favored accounting for the
meaning of concepts more in terms of general “habits” of thought than in terms of the
“concrete” or specific consequences of a particular action. But although that shows
how much more perceptive Peirce is on the matter of meaning than is James (and
probably Dewey as well), conceding that does not acknowledge the great flexibility and
power of Peirce’s original notion, without which (it may be argued) neither James’s
nor Dewey’s innovations would have been entirely satisfactory. In effect, both implicate a Peircean dimension of pragmatism the full import of which they nowhere explicitly invoke. It is nothing less, of course, than the nerve of Peirce’s fallibilism. Descartes had chosen criteria of meaning designed to ensure certainty in knowledge; and Peirce had left the question of transitory measures regarding what to count as the meaning of a concept as open as possible. What Peirce emphasizes instead, therefore, is the pragmatic advantage of favoring the role of transient interests, beliefs about the regular consequences of experiment and deliberate action – hence, also, the possibility of testing and correcting our way of proceeding within the limits of the short run, within the conceptual amplitude of the long run. Seen that way, it is Peirce who sets pragmatism off on the right foot. Peirce never compromises with this aspect of the informality of concepts.

For related reasons, when James (Works Prag, p. 42) advanced the notorious formula, “The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, good, too, for definite, assignable reasons” (and other formulas of the same stripe), he produced a philosophical uproar. The formula, possibly innocuous if suitably explained or reworded, ineluctably suggested to many a reader the near-total ineptitude of James’s labors – possibly, then, the weakness of the general work of pragmatism altogether (see Russell 1910). Readers could hardly deny that James was more than tempted to take the “good” of believing this or that to be (at least at times) sufficient grounds for counting it ipso facto true. James corrects his formula (though never quite satisfactorily) where verification was possible. But he meant his conception to hold in a criterial sense in circumstances where verification could never obtain at all: he meant it to give comfort to those who chose to believe as theists rather than as materialists, or who were pluralists (in his special sense) rather than monists, and so on. James took this kind of existential or personal choice to be of the deepest importance in human terms, and therefore he viewed his own proposal as contributing a decisive advantage in favor of pragmatism’s account of truth, which of course he promptly offered in the spirit of deferring to Peirce’s innovation (see, for instance, Works WB).

James committed at least two substantial mistakes here: for one, he conflated the question of the meaning of the concept “true” with that of the operative or criterial conditions of truth itself; and, for another, he constructed a blunderbuss conception of truth deemed to range univocally over (both) circumstances open to confirmation and disconfirmation and circumstances in what confirmation was in principle impossible. Here, Dewey, always sympathetic with James’s cause but too careful to slip into James’s grosser mistakes himself, fails to draw sufficient or sufficiently precise attention to these difficulties and their potentially unfortunate implications for pragmatism’s long-term prospects (see, for example, LW 15:19–26). One may see here the ambivalent advantage of Dewey’s substitute notion, “warranted assertability.”

The important point of all this, viewed in the setting of philosophy after pragmatism’s second phase (that is, the turn into the new century) – at a time when the movement seems bound to collide with the opposed claims and discipline of analytic philosophy and seems bound to discover that it must prepare itself for a larger Eurocentric and global contest – is simply that we glimpse some of the special strengths of the classic phase of pragmatism itself. For, if you follow the specimen arguments just reviewed, you must see: (a) that conceptual and semantic issues cannot be disjoined...
from epistemology and metaphysics (and more); and (b) that “truth” and “meaning” can be effectively defined, without reproducing the fiasco of positivist views of meaning or analytic trivializations of the concept of truth (see Davidson 1986, 1996), provided we are prepared to acknowledge the deep informality of all such inquiries and their dependence on the flux of social and practical life. These concessions may seem to be very small gains. But they are remarkably telling when linked – in a way not readily accessible to analytic philosophy – to the naturalistic advantages of Hegelian thought and Darwinian economies. That strategy favors, for instance, a naturalism that is neither reductive nor eliminative; the avoidance of dualism and cognitive privilege of every kind; the evolutionary continuity between animals and humans; the rejection of any principled disjunction between theoretical and practical reason; the inherent informality of philosophy itself; the inseparability of fact and value; the denial of teleologism and fixed or final values; the historicity of all our conceptual distinctions; the flux of experience and of the experienced world; the unavoidability of consensual forms of rationality; and a basic trust in the exercise of human freedom bound only by its own sense of rational prudence. It needs to be remembered that these themes have somewhat different careers in Peirce’s and Dewey’s accounts.

IV

It may be reasonably argued that instrumentalism is, in effect, Dewey’s intended unification of the entire philosophical history of pragmatism incorporating the master themes just mentioned. Its principal foci are probably these: a somewhat inexplicit (but palpably) Darwinian and Hegelian reading of naturalism; an emphasis on a blend of Peircean and Jamesian readings of the concepts of meaning and truth inclined to favor the corrections already bruited here in accord with Dewey’s penchant for the would-be rigors of “scientific method”; and the unconditional rejection of final goals or values in moral and political life congruent with pragmatism’s other features. But even this is not as crisp as we might wish.

Perhaps the single most compendious definition of Dewey’s instrumentalism comes to this: he features as his principal organizing intuition what he calls “an indeterminate situation” (LW 12:108–9), which expresses his Darwinian sense of the continuity between precognitive and cognitive animal sources of survival, from which the rigors of science itself emerge (though in sui generis ways), yield constructive and provisional forms of realism (without fixity or privilege), and which, rightly grasped, are themselves finally grounded in a pragmatist rendering of reflexive experience suggestively close to the governing conception of Hegel’s Phenomenology (never explicitly drawn upon, however). In this sense, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (1938) may well be the keystone text of Dewey’s final overview. It is an attempt, of course, to reinterpret the whole of logic instrumentally – from the “indeterminate situation” up to the sciences themselves – 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 (see Thayer 1980; Burke 1984; Sleeper 1986; Shook 2000; Hildebrand 2003).
The reason for emphasizing the retrospective recovery of these master features of the classic phase of pragmatism is partly a matter of accuracy; but, more than that, it serves to assure us that the classic phase had already fashioned, quite unknowingly, an outlook on the prospective life of American philosophy (possibly, of the whole of Eurocentric philosophy) that neither analytic nor Continental practitioners could convincingly match. That pragmatism would itself be revived in the extraordinary way it was – and, withal, in a way that obliged the movement to come to terms with the distinctive challenges of both analytic and Continental philosophy – is itself little short of a miracle. For it drew to the attention of pragmatism’s champions (often indifferent, toward the end of the classic period, to the best work of other movements) the need to strike out afresh along exploratory lines that were never central to its own early work.

Broadly speaking, the nerve of all philosophical contests at the start of the twenty-first century lies with the prospects and adequacy of a naturalism close to the pragmatist conception. It may be divided into two sorts of confrontation: against the strongest forms of analytic philosophy, the struggle pits a non-reductive (Darwinian and Hegelian) naturalism against the scientistic forms of reductionism and eliminativism (see Margolis 2002, 2003); against the strongest currents of Continental philosophy (Kantian transcendentalism, Husserlian phenomenology, the Heideggerean critique of Western philosophy), the struggle pits the assurances of the adequacy of naturalistic resources against deeper Continental doubts (see, for instance, Rouse 1987 and 1996, Okrent 1988, Olafson 2001). At the present moment, both struggles are in play. But it would not be unfair to say that pragmatism’s prospects are easily the equal (prima facie) of the principal programs of its natural opponents. The most salient concerns of the opening of our century may well oblige us to explore the fuller implications of historicity and pluralism and relativism in the setting of a globalized form of life. These demonstrations remain to be supplied. But, without such an enlargement, pragmatism will surely lose the advantage of its own revival.

References and further reading


Part I

Major Figures
Charles S. Peirce was born into advantageous circumstances on September 10, 1839 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Benjamin and Sarah Hunt (Mills) Peirce; but, on April 19, 1914, near Milford, Pennsylvania, he died in poverty and isolation. He graduated from Harvard College in 1859, the year in which Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published. His father was one of the foremost mathematicians in the United States in the nineteenth century, enjoying a distinguished career as a professor at Harvard and a scientist with the US Coast and Geodetic Survey. Charles worked as a scientist with this agency for three decades, beginning in 1861. As a young man, he also held a position at the Harvard Observatory. During his lifetime, his only published book was *Photometric Researches* (1878), a scientific treatise growing out of his work in this area. Undeniably tragic in some respects, his life can hardly be counted a failure. His published writings “run to approximately twelve thousand pages,” whereas we have eighty thousand pages of his unpublished manuscripts. The latter perhaps even more than the former provide unmistakable evidence that Charles Peirce was a philosophical genius. Though he tended to make a mess of his life (incurring foolish debts, alienating generous friends, and squandering exceptional opportunities), he made much of his genius and even more of his passion to find things out. Ernest Nagel’s judgment is far from idiosyncratic: “Charles Sanders Peirce remains the most original, versatile, and comprehensive philosophical mind this country has yet produced” (cited in *W* 2:xi).

**Philosopher and Scientist**

Peirce’s philosophical contribution is of a piece with his scientific training; he not only came to philosophy from science but also pursued philosophical questions largely for the sake of articulating a normative theory of objective investigation. He did manifest an intrinsic interest in substantive philosophical questions, but methodological concerns were never far from his persistent attempts to address in a straightforward manner these substantive issues. Early in his career he gave a series of lectures on “The Logic of Science.” His lifelong concern to disclose the logic of science resulted, in the end, in a transformation of his understanding of logic. He came to envision logic as a theory of inquiry.
Peirce refused to define philosophy in opposition to science in the modern sense. In order to understand his conception of philosophy, it is necessary to consider the place of philosophy in his classification of the sciences and also simply his view of science. He drew a sharp distinction between practical and theoretical investigation. Since many theoretical sciences have evolved out of practical pursuits, the arts are hardly irrelevant to an understanding of science, especially since Peirce stresses the importance of the history of the sciences for a comprehension of their nature (see EP 2:38). But theoria has transcended its origin, such that a large number of purely theoretical investigations have emerged in their own right. The vitality of these investigations crucially depends on pursuing them for their own sake, apart from any concern with what practical benefits might accrue to theoretical discoveries. Philosophical investigation was, in Peirce’s judgment, a theoretical science, though one disfigured almost beyond recognition by too intimate an association with seminary-trained philosophers (CP 1.620, 6.3).

Taken together, Peirce classified the distinct branches of philosophical inquiry as one of the three broadest divisions of theoretical knowledge. He located philosophy between mathematics, the rubric under which he subsumed the most abstract branches of theoretical inquiry, and (using a term borrowed from Jeremy Bentham) idioscopy, the least abstract ones (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology). He supposed, like all other sciences, the branches of philosophy drew upon mathematics for important principles and conceptions, not the least of these pertaining to relationships of an exceeding abstract character. He also supposed that less abstract sciences such as physics and psychology drew upon not only mathematics but also philosophy for some of their most basic principles and conceptions. In this threefold classification of theoretical science, he was indebted to Auguste Comte’s principle of classification (“one science depends upon another for fundamental principles, but does not furnish such principles to that other” (CP 1.180)). A thoroughly naturalistic account of scientific intelligence, however, undergirds this formal classification of the theoretical sciences. Moreover, a historical sensitivity informed Peirce’s numerous attempts to offer a detailed classification of our scientific pursuits.

Scientific Intelligence and Theoretical Knowledge

Peirce took science to be “a living thing” (CP 1.234; cf. 1.232), preoccupied with “conjectures, which are either getting framed or getting tested” (CP 1.234). It is nothing less than a mode of life; more fully, “a mode of life whose single animating purpose is to find out the real truth, which pursues this purpose by a well-considered method, founded on thorough acquaintance with such scientific results already ascertained by others as may be available, and which seeks cooperation in the hope that the truth may be found” (CP 7.55).

Peirce stressed repeatedly that scientific inquiry is essentially a communal endeavor. Reliance on others is here a necessity. The appeal to the observations and assessments of others is constitutive of science, at least in Peirce’s sense, a sense he took to be faithful to what the successful practices of experimental inquiry manifest about themselves in their actual development. Peirce’s definition of reality (see SCIENTIFIC...
Realism, Antirealism, and Empiricism) as what the community of inquirers would discover, given adequate resources and time, reflected his training as a scientist. His antipathy to much of modern philosophy was a reaction to the prevalent tendency of inquirers during this epoch to exhibit “an absurd disregard for other’s opinions” (W 2:313). His identification with modern science was of a piece with his commitment to communal inquiry.

The passionate pursuit of theoretical knowledge was, for Peirce, intrinsically worthwhile and intelligible. In one sense, he traced the origin of our knowledge to our instincts, in another, simply to the dynamic conjunction of human intelligence and cosmic intelligibility. He supposed, “all that science has done [far] is to study those relations . . . brought into prominence [by] . . . two instincts – the instinct of feeding, which brought with it elementary knowledge of mechanical forces, space, etc., and the instinct of breeding, which brought with it elementary knowledge of psychical motives, of time, etc.” (CP 1.118; cf. 5.591). In general, he was convinced that humans are able to divine something of the principles of nature because they have evolved as part of nature and, therefore, under the influence of these principles (CP 7.46). Humans partake of the world they know: the ways of the cosmos are not utterly foreign to the propensities of our minds, otherwise they would be forever unknown and we long since extinct (see, e.g., CP 7.38). “Our faculty of guessing,” Peirce contended, “corresponds to a bird’s musical and aeronautic powers; that is, it is to us, as those are to them, the loftiest of our merely instinctive powers” (CP 7.48) or inherited dispositions. Here is a robust affirmation of biological continuity without any reductive implications. For, whatever its origin, countless individuals throughout human history have been animated by, above all else, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The intelligence of human beings and the intelligibility of their circumambient world are, in another sense, sufficient to explain why we inquire (CP 2.13). The lure of intelligibility proves to be irresistible to an intelligence disposed simply to wonder why, say, an event occurred or our expectations were contravened (CP 7.189). At least some humans conduct investigations simply to find out whatever truth might be discovered by a painstaking, persistent, and systematic inquiry. Aristotle was one such person, Peirce another.

It may not be oxymoronic to speak of instinctual intelligence, if only to facilitate a contrast with scientific intelligence. The ingenuity and, in a sense, intelligence with which bees, by means of instinctual complex movements, indicate the direction and distance of honey – or beavers by means of intricate actions construct a dam – are too obvious to deny. The dispositions by which these feats are performed appear to be largely innate or instinctual. At least something akin to intelligence appears to be operative in the accomplishment of such complex tasks, securing some obvious advantage.

Human intelligence is, however, predominantly scientific intelligence in its most rudimentary form; for it is “an intelligence capable of learning by experience” (CP 2.227). In accord with Peirce’s own principle of continuity, we should not suppose that there is an absolutely sharp dichotomy between instinctual and scientific (or experiential) intelligence, for (as we have already seen) our very capacity to learn from experience attests to the beneficial operation of instinctual tendencies. Scientific intelligence is rooted in our instinctual drives. Our capacity to learn from experience is
closely connected with our capacity to subject our conceptions, assertions, and inferences to criticism. Peirce proposed that “‘rational’ means self-criticizing, self-controlling and self-controlled, and therefore open to incessant question” (CP 7.77; cf. 5.440). In light of this definition, it is clear that scientific and rational intelligence, though apparently different in meaning, inescapably overlap in fact; for we can most effectively learn from experience only by an ongoing process of complex interrogation in which our suppositions, conceptions, claims, and conclusions are all subjected to self-criticism. Peirce was aware of “man’s stupendous power of shutting his eyes to plain facts” (1975–7, vol. 2, p. 99), but he was confident in the force majeure of human experience: “Experience may be defined as the sum of ideas [beliefs] which have been irresistibly borne in upon us, overwhelming all free-play of thought, by the tenor of our lives. The authority of experience consists in the fact that its power cannot be resisted; it is a flood against which nothing can stand” (CP 7.437; cf. 5.50).

The pursuit of theoretical knowledge entails the cultivation of scientific intelligence and, in turn, the cultivation of such intelligence is also the cultivation of instinctual intelligence in its distinctively human form (for what human instincts facilitate above all else is the acquisition of habits other than the ones with which we were born). Human rationality is, in the first instance, “an Unmatured Instinctive Mind.” As such, phylogeny is merely ancillary to ontogeny: the history of the species is, in effect, taken up into that of the individual and, as the inheritor also of vast cultural resources, the individual becomes a self-determining and, to some extent, even a self-defining agent (see, e.g., CP 5.533, 1.591). The instinctual mind of human beings requires a development beyond that of the evolutionary history in which it took shape and proved itself viable; the “prolonged childhood” of human beings proves as much, as does the “childlike character” of the instinctual mind itself. In humans and to some extent perhaps also in other species (ones especially adapted to learning from experience), “Instinct is a weak, uncertain Instinct.” This allows it to be “infinitely plastic”; and this underwrites alterability and hence the possibility of intellectual growth (growth in intelligence, the capacity to learn ever more effectively from experience). “Uncertain tendencies, unstable states of equilibrium are conditions sine qua non for the manifestation of Mind” (CP 7.381). The general disposition to acquire novel dispositions entails a plasticity itself entailing a susceptibility to disequilibria. Doubt is one name for the instability into which an agent is thrown when the dispositions of that agent prove ineffective in a given situation; for doubt is at bottom the arrest, or disruption, of a belief or habit.

Philosophy Within the Limits of Experience Alone

Despite his indebtedness to Kant, Peirce did not make theoretical philosophy into an essentially critical discipline charged with the task of defining the intrinsic limits of human knowledge. Like Kant, he did insist that the limits of experience define the limits of knowledge (“all our knowledge is, and forever must be, relative to human experience and to the nature of the human mind” (CP 6.95)), but he conceived experience in such a way as to be capable of aiding us in discovering to some degree the way things are (not simply the way they appear to us). He refused to sever appearance