The church of pragmatism

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Abstract

In his Four ages, *John Deely points to Peirce's 1905 Monist article, "What is pragmatism," as a key text in the history of human intellectual development. It was there that Peirce famously kissed his child (the word "pragmatism") good-bye and renamed his great contribution to philosophy "pragmaticism," a word "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers." According to Deely, what Peirce did amounted to "disowning the most famous American development in all of philosophy's history"; and this, Deely says, has been an embarrassment to those Americans who "cherish the idea of a home-grown philosophy." Deely claims that to attempt to dismiss Peirce's rejection of "pragmatism" as a mere verbal quibble misses the point that what Peirce did was to step from the third great age of philosophy, where pragmatism dwells, into the fourth great age, the proper home for pragmaticism. There is, indeed, something right about this way of looking at things. But in an attempt to draw clear boundaries Deely misrepresents a reality that is fuzzier than the picture he paints. Peirce never meant to separate himself entirely from pragmatism, any more than Martin Luther intended to separate himself entirely from Catholic Christianity. Peirce only wanted to stake out a more genuine doctrine, a more precise one, free from some of the errors the popular pragmatists had fallen into. Peirce's separation from the other pragmatists was more like a schism within a church than a paradigm shift: Peirce remained a pragmatist, of sorts, to the end. But the errors he sought to expose and avoid were rooted in the precepts of the Third Age and Peirce's way forward, as Deely recognizes, was indeed the Way of Signs.*

Keywords: Deely; Peirce; pragmaticism; pragmatism.

In his remarkably substantial book (choose your ontology), *Four ages of understanding*, John Deely sets the date for the beginning of the postmodern era at May 14, 1867, the day Charles Peirce read his now justly famous "On a new list of categories" to the members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.[1] Deely admits, though, that May 14, 1867 is not an absolute beginning but only "a fixed point" in the "otherwise shifting sands" of time. Deely reminds us that "the wintry winds of modernity would continue to blow long past this early date, but as the official beginning of spring does not by itself bring an end to winter's blasts, still, it signals that the end is near" (Deely 2001: 637). This would seem to point to Peirce's "New list" as his pivotal contribution to the history of human intellectual development — and I suppose Deely would agree that it was. But Deely also points to Peirce's April 1905 *Monist* article, "What pragmatism is," as another key text in the history of human thought.

   Deely recounts the story of that text. By 1905 pragmatism was very much in vogue and Peirce had watched with satisfaction as his word "pragmatism" had "gained general recognition" through the agency of William James and F. C. S. Schiller. But lately things were not going well and Peirce was conflicted, wishing on the one hand to enjoy his paternity of such a popular philosophical movement while, on the other hand, feeling more and more estranged from it. "[A]t present," Peirce lamented, "the word begins to be met with occasionally in the literary journals, where it gets abused in the merciless way that words have to expect when they fall into literary clutches" ("What pragmatism is," *CP* 5.414; *EP2*: 334, 1905). This was the pretext Peirce needed to drag in his ethics of terminology "over head and shoulders" and announce the birth of the word "pragmaticism" to "serve the precise purpose" of expressing his original definition. He would, he said, "kiss his child [pragmatism] good-bye and relinquish it to its higher destiny" — "pragmaticism," he said, "is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" (*CP* 5.414; *EP2*: 335, 1905). But the suggestion that it was the kidnapping of "pragmatism" by the literati that forced Peirce's hand may have been a friendly gesture towards James and Schiller, as is suggested by Peirce's revelation in later years that it was really *they* who had forced his hand. In 1909, in a paper Peirce wrote (but never finished) to honor Lady Welby, he admitted that he had taken up the new word, "pragmaticism," because "James and Schiller made [pragmatism] imply 'the will to believe,' the mutability of truth, the soundness of Zeno's refutation of motion, and pluralism generally" ("A sketch of logical critics" *EP* 2: 457, 1909). He wanted to distance his view from theirs. That much is clear. But how far from them did he really want to go? That's the question.

According to Deely, he wanted to be in *a different age* from James and Schiller, and their ilk, although perhaps Peirce didn't desire a distance quite that vast — but he clearly did want to create some distance between his pragmatism and theirs. Deely characterizes the message of Peirce's 1905 paper as "a ringing statement ... that what pragmatism is, is not pragmaticism" (Deely 2001: 616). Deely presses his point:

The greatest American philosopher disowning the most famous American development in all of philosophy's history is a considerable embarrassment to those who cherish the idea of a home-grown philosophy, and prefer being able to cite their own to the constant deferral of philosophical greatness to the European past of the "colonies." So it is understandable that those desirous of promoting philosophy with a distinctively American accent have largely been discomfited or annoyed by Peirce's disavowal of "pragmatism," and have tried to pass it off as merely a verbal quibble, merely a far from isolated manifestation of the cantankerous prima-donnaness of a notably eccentric individual. (Deely 2001: 616)

While I might quibble a little with Deely's implication that Peirce's pragmaticism has a less "distinctively American accent" than James's and Dewey's pragmatism, I agree that Peirce's "disavowal" was no mere verbal quibble: a very serious distinction was being made. But was Peirce's *distancing* from James and Schiller really a *disavowal?* Did Peirce really disown pragmatism? I'm not convinced that he did — but let me add that even if I'm right about this it doesn't pose a serious problem for Deely's story of the four ages because my concern is directed more to Deely's rhetoric than to the substance of his account. However, my view of the matter is consistent with the claim that there is a distinctive classical American philosophy that is probably best characterized as pragmatism, but in a vague sense that includes Peirce's pragmaticism along with the pragmatisms of James, Dewey, and the other classical American pragmatists (Houser forthcoming).

Let's review Peirce's concerns from around this time. On March 7, 1904 he wrote to William James: "The humanistic element of pragmatism is very true and important and impressive; but I do not think that the doctrine can be *proved* in that way. The present generation likes to skip proofs ... You and Schiller carry pragmatism too far for me. I don't want to exaggerate it but keep it within the bounds to which the evidences of it are limited" (*EP* 2: xxvii). The year before, in his Harvard Lectures, Peirce had turned his attention vigorously to the quest to prove pragmatism and from that time on for the rest of his life he judged his conception of pragmatism (his pragmaticism) by its fitness to be subjected to the rigors of philosophical proof. Notice what he wrote in the very paper under consideration, his 1905 "What pragmatism is":

Much as the writer has gained from the perusal of what other pragmatists have written, he still thinks there is a decisive advantage in his original conception of the doctrine. From this original form every truth that follows from any of the other forms can be deduced, while some errors can be avoided into which other pragmatists have fallen. The original view appears, too, to be a more compact and unitary conception than the others. But its capital merit, in the writer's eyes, is that it more readily connects itself with a critical proof of its truth. (*EP2*: 335)

We should bear in mind that "What pragmatism is" was part of a series of articles that was intended to provide a proof of pragmatism and it was difficulties Peirce ran into trying to fulfill that purpose that caused him to abandon the series.

It is important, then, to take seriously what Peirce says here, that he favors his original conception especially because it is more susceptible of proof. But note, too, that he points to errors of other pragmatists that the pragmaticist can avoid. What are some of these errors? As I've already noted, Peirce said that he had separated his pragmaticism from James's and Shiller's pragmatism because they made the word "pragmatism" imply "the will to believe, the mutability of truth, the soundness of Zeno's refutation of motion, and pluralism generally." I will refer you to Deely for a full answer to this question because he gives a good account of the errors of pragmatism that pragmaticism corrects or avoids. Simply put, they are the errors due to the inherent nominalism of pragmatism of James and his followers. Deely notes that

[i]n all the variants of pragmatism, practical, experimental effects are made the determination of truth. Three things distinguish pragmaticism from such a simple, positivistic doctrine, which is compatible with nominalism: first, its retention of a purified philosophy, second, its full acceptance of the main body of our instinctive beliefs; and thirdly, its strenuous insistence upon the truth of scholastic realism (or a close approximation to [it]). (Deely 2001: 617)

Here it is worth noting that in the same year Peirce published "What pragmatism is" he followed it with a second paper in the series, "Issues of pragmaticism," where he restated his pragmatic maxim in semiotic terms. He identified the meaning that pragmaticism seeks to enunciate as that of symbols rather than simple conceptions. The thrust of this second article was to articulate his forms of critical common-sensism and scholastic realism, which he regarded as consequences (or "issues") of pragmaticism. He extended his realism to include the acceptance of "real vagues" and "real possibilities," and he pointed out that "it is the reality of some possibilities that pragmaticism is most concerned to insist upon."

According to Max Fisch, *pragmaticism* had now become *pragmatism* "purged of the nominalistic dross of its original exposition" (Fisch 1986: 195). And we know that soon afterwards, in 1907, Peirce began working on his famous letter to *The Nation* (MS 318) in which he systematically reconceived his pragmaticism in terms of his theory of signs. Here Peirce makes a substantial contribution to John Deely's main argument. I have to point out, however, that in MS 318 Peirce was perfectly willing to revert to the name "pragmatism" for his doctrine, which he represented as a variant of the more general view. He even went so far as to say that between James's definition of pragmatism and his there "is certainly a slight theoretical divergence" but that this divergence "for the most part, becomes evanescent in practice; and though we may differ on important questions of philosophy, — especially as regards the infinite and the absolute, — I am inclined to think that the discrepancies reside in other than the pragmatistic ingredients of our thought" (*EP* 2: 401).

I do not want to minimize the differences that Deely has so aptly identified. There is, indeed, something right about his way of looking at things; but in an attempt to draw clear boundaries Deely misrepresents a reality that is fuzzier than the picture he paints. Peirce never meant to separate himself entirely from pragmatism, any more than Martin Luther intended to separate himself entirely from Christianity; Peirce only wanted to stake out a more precise doctrine, one free of the errors (perhaps we can say "heresies") the popular pragmatists had fallen into, to be sure, but also one more susceptible of philosophical proof. Peirce's separation from the other pragmatists was more like a schism within a church than a paradigm shift. Peirce remained a pragmatist, of sorts, until the end. But it is true that the errors he sought to expose and avoid were rooted in the precepts of the third age, the way of ideas, and that Peirce's way forward, as Deely recognizes, was indeed the way of signs.

Now if I am right in thinking that Peirce was refining and specifying his pragmatic doctrine, his sect, but not abandoning the larger church, then, while Deely is certainly right in holding that there must be telling differences, there should also be some substantial common ground. I think there is but I admit that it is not easy to find it except in the overlapping family-resemblance way that Wittgenstein made famous. This was more or less established as long ago as 1908 when Arthor O. Lovejoy "discriminated thirteen meanings of pragmatism and showed that some of them were in contradiction with one another" (Wiener 1973: 551). In his excellent article on pragmatism in the *Dictionary of the history of ideas*, Philip Wiener discussed the problem, raised by Lovejoy, "whether there was any coherent core of ideas that could define [pragmatism]."

"At one extremity," Wiener notes, "one can find self-styled pragmatists with a Jamesian tendency to regard their personal experience as a sufficient source and test of truth; the extreme group in the undefined fringe can only charitably be included in Peirce's ideal community of minds whose opinions in the long run are destined to converge on the one unalterable Platonic truth" (Wiener 1973: 551). But we don't have to be told any more that there are some significant differences. The question is whether even these variants, or sects, notwithstanding their extreme differences, still belong to the same general kind.

With this in mind, Wiener reviews the attempt by H. S. Thayer to find this common ground. Thayer suggests that pragmatism, in general, stands for

(1) a procedural rule for explicating meanings of certain philosophical and scientific concepts; (2) "a theory of knowledge, experience, and reality maintaining that (a) thought and knowledge are biologically and socially evolved modes by means of adaptation" and control; (b) reality is transitional and thought is a guide to satisfying interests or realizing purposes; (c) "all knowledge is a behavioral process evaluative of future experience" and thinking is experimentally aimed at organizing, planning, or controlling future experience; and (3) "a broad philosophic attitude toward our conceptualization of experience." (Thayer 1968: 431, quoted in Wiener 1973: 552)

But Wiener believes that Thayer does not "dwell sufficiently on the varied character and conflicting theories of method, knowledge, and reality maintained by pragmatists of different schools in diverse fields of thought and of diverse cultural and historical backgrounds" (Wiener 1973: 552). Weiner says that

The historical and cultural facets of various pragmatisms do not all fit under any general definition for two reasons. First, the philosophical writings of a leading pragmatist like C. S. Peirce are concerned with and defend theories of truth and reality that are not merely procedural, behavioristic, transitional, or conceptual. Peirce's metaphysical writings contain a speculative, idealistic version of pragmatism which he called "pragmaticism" in order to disassociate his philosophy from the pragmatisms of William James and James's disciple F. C. S. Schiller. Secondly, whole areas of knowledge, other than those mentioned in the general definition above, have been discussed by diverse pragmatists in their interpretations of the nature of history, of law and politics, of language, and of mathematical logic. (Wiener 1973: 552)

But it seems to me that Wiener has slipped back to focusing on the differences without attending to the common vision of pragmatists, however

vague and unclear it may be. Thayer's attempt certainly highlights some important commonalities and even if he didn't find a satisfactory definition he found some common ground. Reinterpreting Thayer's findings we might say that pragmatists, generally speaking, seek a procedural rule for explicating meanings; regard thought and knowledge as biologically and socially based evolutionary outcomes or adaptations and regard knowledge to fundamentally involve behavioral processes "evaluative of future experience," which I take to mean something akin to software programs; and finally, have a common attitude toward the conceptualization of experience. Sure this is fuzzy. But I'm only looking for common ground, something that is common to pragmatists that distinguishes them from, say, analytic philosophers. I'm looking for a vision. The pragmatist sect sees evolution and growth as keys to understanding human nature and thought, and regards thought as a function of organisms tending to help them survive in the dynamics of future experience; is skeptical of traditional values, absolutes, and even theories; is very attentive to the impact of experience and the role of action in the development of intelligence, recognizing the importance of chance; is attracted to the methods of science; and generally abandons the quest for permanence and certainty.[2]

I hesitate to suggest this, but why not look in a dictionary to see how well our lexicographers have succeeded in defining pragmatism. According to the *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*, pragmatism is "an American movement in philosophy founded by C. S. Peirce and William James and marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief."

I think that's pretty good — as far as it goes. There are three key elements here: (1) meaning is associated with practical bearings; (2) the function of thought is taken to be to guide action; and (3) the test of truth is said to be in the practical consequences of belief. These are indeed keys to understanding pragmatism in general. If we go to the OED for an important historical illustration of the use of the term "pragmatism," we find the famous 1898 quotation from William James's public introduction of the word: "The principal of practicalism or pragmatism, as [C. S. Peirce] called it, when I first heard him enunciate it at Cambridge [Mass.] in the early '70s, is the clue ... by following which ... we may keep our feet upon the proper trail." I like James's allusion to staying on the proper trail. This shows that from the beginning pragmatism was understood to have something to do with the guiding purpose, or function, of thought. This is certainly a key to the pragmatic vision.

pragmaticism (prag-mat'i-sizm), *n.* [*prag-matic* + *-ism.*] A special and limited form of pragmatism, in which the pragmatism is restricted to the determining of the meaning of concepts (particularly of philosophic concepts) by consideration of the experimental differences in the conduct of life which would conceivably result from the affirmation or denial of the meaning in question.

He [the writer] framed the theory that a conception, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life. . . . To serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he begs to announce the birth of the word "*pragmaticism*."
        C. S. Peirce, in The Monist, April, 1905, p. 166.

pragmatism, *n.* 3. In *philos.*, a method of thought, a general movement or tendency of thought, and a specific school, in which stress is placed upon practical consequences and practical values as standards for explicating philosophic conceptions and as tests for determining their value and, especially, their truth. The word is used in a variety of senses, of greater or less breadth and definiteness. The following meanings of the term are arranged in the order of descending generality : (*a*) An attitude of mind, namely that of "looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities, and looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts." *W. James*, Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, p. 55. (*b*) A theory concerning the proper method of determining the meaning of conceptions. "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." *C. S. Peirce*, in Baldwin's Dict. of Philos. and Psychol., II. This theory was first propounded by Mr. Peirce in an article upon "How to Make our Ideas Clear" in the "Popular Science Monthly" in 1878. The term 'pragmatism' does not, however, appear there. In an article in the "Monist" for 1905, Mr. Peirce says that he "has used it continually in philosophic conversation, since, perhaps, the mid-seventies." The term was publicly introduced in print by Professor William James in 1898 in an address upon "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Realities," in which the authorship of the term and of the method is credited to Mr. Peirce. The latter has recently used the term 'pragmaticism' to express this meaning. (*c*) The theory that the processes and the materials of knowledge are determined by practical or purposive considerations—that there is no such thing as knowledge determined by exclusively theoretical, speculative, or abstract intellectual considerations. This definition expresses the net or mean sense of the term in its various uses. "Now quite the most striking feature of the new

theory was its recognition of an inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose ; and that consideration it was which determined the preference for the name 'pragmatism.'" *C. S. Peirce*, in The Monist, 1905. F. C. S. Schiller has defined pragmatism as "the thorough recognition that the purposive character of mental life generally must influence and pervade also our most remotely cognitive activities." Humanism, Philosophic Essays, p. 8.

Pragmatism — by which I mean the doctrine that reality possesses practical character and that this character is most efficaciously expressed in the function of intelligence.
        J. Dewey, in Essays Philosophical and Psychological, p. 159.

(*d*) A theory of the nature of truth, namely, that the correspondence between fact and idea which constitutes truth consists in the power of the idea in question to work satisfactorily, or to produce the results intended by it.

Such then would be the scope of *pragmatism* —first, a method, and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth.   *W. James*, Pragmatism, p. 65.

(*e*) A metaphysical theory regarding the nature of reality, namely that it is still in process of making, and that human ideas and efforts play a fundamental role in its making: the equivalent of *humanism* as a metaphysical term.

The essential contrast is that for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity, while for *pragmatism* it is still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future.
        W. James, Pragmatism, p. 257.

Pragmatism . . . is a conscious application to epistemology (or logic) of a teleological psychology, which implies, ultimately, a voluntaristic metaphysic.
        F. C. S. Schiller, Studies in Humanism, p. 12.

Figure 1.   *Definitions of "pragmaticism" and "pragmatism" from the* Supplement to the century dictionary

Finally, from the *Supplement to the century dictionary*, I will simply note the interesting definition of "pragmatism" here reproduced. Although this definition was written by John Dewey, I would be surprised if Peirce, a principal contributor to the *Century dictionary*, had not seen it in advance of publication. Note that Dewey remarks that Peirce had recently taken up the name "pragmaticism" to carry his original meaning. Also notice that just above "pragmatism" the word "pragmaticism" is defined, and the definition begins by noting that pragmaticism is a special and limited form of pragmatism. This definition was written by Peirce himself.

    None of this proves that pragmatism and pragmaticism have more in common than not, but I think these considerations are indicative that Deely has been too extreme in claiming so pointedly that pragmaticism is not pragmatism. That is something like saying that Calvanism is not

Christianity because it attacks a form of Christianity or because it rejects some of the doctrines of other Christians. Notice what Peirce wrote to Calderoni in 1905:

In the April number of the *Monist* ["What pragmatism is," 1905] I proposed that the word "pragmatism" should hereafter be used somewhat loosely to signify affiliation with Schiller, James, Dewey, Royce, and the rest of us, while the particular doctrine which I invented the word to denote, which is your first kind of pragmatism, should be called "pragmaticism." The extra syllable will indicate the narrower meaning. (*CP* 8.205–8.206, c. 1905)

"Schiller, James, Dewey, Royce, and the rest of us," Peirce wrote. He has put himself in the camp with Deely's pragmatists though reserving the right to a narrower interpretation. It is as though he sees himself as belonging to the same philosophical family, or maybe the same philosophic church. He is a member of the church of pragmatism though not of the same sect as James and Schiller. There may have been a schism, with some important doctrines denied by one side or the other, but Peirce never completely rejected the pragmatist faith.

But none of this is to deny that Peirce's pragmaticism, which so clearly separated itself from the nominalism of some of the pragmatists, and which fully incorporated Peirce's theory of signs, belongs in the fourth great age of understanding while most other pragmatists found their footing mainly in the Modern Age. This, I believe, is all Deely requires for his critique of the development of understanding. But pragmatism as a general doctrine, guided by a vision which, if not altogether common is largely common, at least to the classic pragmatists, crosses over that great divide between the third and fourth ages, and belongs, as a *general doctrine*, as the *church of pragmatism*, in neither exclusively. So the reality is fuzzier than the picture Deely painted even though Peirce's pragmaticism does stand out sharply within the larger pragmatism and may well be the theoretical marker, the index if you will, that points to the beginning of the age of signs.

Notes

1. This paper in an earlier form was presented to the symposium on John Deely's *Four ages of understanding* at the annual meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, September 29, 2006.
2. We might also look for common ground in the context of ideas that spawned and came to characterize classical American philosophy. According to Max H. Fisch, who introduced to expression "Classic American philosophy" to identify that rich defining period

of American intellectual development that gave rise to pragmatism, the themes and tendencies that expressed the leading and and most characteristic philosophic tendencies of the time were the rejection of Cartesianism, the naturalizing of mind, the mentalizing of nature, a shift of focus from substance to process, the deflation of the eternal, a turn from the past to the future, the connection of thought with purpose, a rejection of the spectator theory of knowledge, the identification of thought with semiosis, a shift from seminary to laboratory philosophy, attention to the cooperative nature of inquiry, a privileging of method, an interest in applying scientific method to the study of society, and an idealization of the great community. (See Fisch's 1996 [1951] "General introduction" to *Classic American philosophers*.) When one notices that the six philosophers that Fisch identifies as the principal classic American philosophers are Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, and Whitehead, it becomes clear that the ethos of classical American philosophy is essentially that of classical pragmatism. See Houser (forthcoming), for a discussion of classical American philosophy as the common ground of classical pragmatism. For an earlier attempt to isolate pragmatism's common ground, see the section "What is pragmatism" from Houser (2003).

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