

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a distinctly American philosophy that aims to uncover practical knowledge; knowledge that *works* in a particular situation. The acquired knowledge is evaluated by reference to its problem solving capacity in everyday life, rather than its universally applicability, which makes pragmatism a fruitful tool for action researchers.

Pragmatism is better described as a philosophical method for doing, rather than a philosophical theory per se. It is not simply a collection of viewpoints about a specific concept, such as ‘truth’, ‘identity’ or ‘reality’. Pragmatism concerns how humans should conduct business, as managers, accountants, or researchers, whenever engaging in any form of inquiry. In its narrow interpretation pragmatism is a method of determining the meaning of concepts to show there is no meaning without practical consequences. All concepts are therefore contextual by nature and have different meanings for different people in different situations. The meaningfulness of knowledge is determined by its ability to solve a practical problem.

As a result, knowledge is seen as a contextual property that evolves through everyday practices and is measured by its practical consequences. Hence, the notion *practical* knowledge is more appropriate in pragmatism as it reflects the situational creation of knowledge in regards to its problem solving ability. In the same vein, action researchers view the development of knowledge as part of the daily inquiry process, rather than a monopolistic notion of academics or social scientists.

On a broader level, pragmatism is a method for uncovering contextual truth. For pragmatists, truth is naturally contextual since our knowledge and beliefs about scientific concepts, on which humans base their understanding of the world, is only *true* as long it bears practical

consequences. Truth is provisional; it is the result of ongoing practical inquiry in the form of applying practical knowledge in different situations. Truth is defined by its pragmatic use in ongoing experiences, and not in association with the objective qualities of the concept. Truth is the result and goal of inquiry, something that many action researchers would agree with. Inquiry is the reflective and iterative process of solving a particular problem. Throughout the process, consensus about both means and ends has to be established, which results in the co-ordination of thought, knowledge and action.

Origins of Pragmatism

The origins of pragmatism can be traced to the year 1870. A group of young students from Cambridge, Massachusetts, including Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, founded the so-called “Metaphysical Club”. The young men met regularly to discuss their views on modern philosophy and its associated problems with the distinct viewpoint that there is no knowledge apart from the knower, opposing the predominant notion of objective and absolute truth at the time. Peirce and James used the debates to become the pioneers of pragmatism. Not long after these informal meetings a more comprehensive description of pragmatism emerged, beginning with Peirce’s two essays *The Fixation of Belief* (1877) and *How to Make our Ideas Clear* (1877). Shortly after, in 1878, James published a series of articles himself, in which he manifested his philosophical take on pragmatism.

The well-travelled James inspired and derived inspiration from a diverse assortment of fellow travellers, sympathisers, and acute critics. As a result, pragmatism gained prominence and support, and was soon closely followed by intellectuals in and outside of America, including John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Giovanni Papini, Alfred North Whitehead and F.C.S. Schiller. A multiplicity of forms of pragmatism emerged but the works of John Dewey and

George Herbert Mead, from the Chicago School, are particularly recognized as important texts. While Dewey, deeply influenced by William James, became a prominent figure in applying pragmatism to social sciences, Mead became one of the founders of social psychology and the symbolic interaction movement.

More recently, Richard Rorty had a significant impact on the pragmatic community by introducing linguistic pragmatism. In his work, also described as neopragmatism, Richard Rorty integrated and applied the principles of John Dewey, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Charles Darwin and questioned the traditional concept of knowledge as a mental mirroring of our external world. Rorty's linguistic pragmatism highlighted the importance of conversations in the process of inquiry that allow us to *use* our reality to get what we want. Similarly to the first pragmatic wave, many figures have significantly contributed to the neopragmatic movement, such as Hilary Putnam and Susan Haack.

Since its origin in the late nineteenth century, the pragmatic method has been applied to many professions. Hence, it accommodates a number of theoretical viewpoints, some of which are conflicting. The internal disagreement makes it difficult to single out one precise form of pragmatism. Nonetheless, the main principles remain; pragmatism is a problem solving method that aims to create practical knowledge through (scientific) inquiry.

Conceptual Overview

Pragmatism emerged as a critical response to the western philosophy and its existing dualisms. Dualism refers to a division between mind and body, proposed by the French philosopher Rene Descartes, who believes knowledge exists independently of the knower. Pragmatists have no interest in dualistic debates around philosophical concepts, such as

positivism versus postmodernism or theory versus practice, as they are perceived as mere language games. The debates occur independently from the context they are in. Instead, pragmatists are concerned with the application, integration and meaning of these philosophical concepts in daily life, rather than dealing with their objective meaning. Pragmatism rejects the notion of objective truth since all knowledge, belief and scientific concepts are provisional. Knowledge is contextual; there is no knowledge apart from the knower, and truth only exists as long as a concept offers meaningful practical solutions.

As a result of the discussions around traditional philosophy, pragmatism is a method that connects dualisms by focusing on the inquiry process that is set out to solve problems. Pragmatism is built on two interrelated conceptualizations of philosophical inquiry: interpretation of meaning and interpretation of truth.

Interpretation of Meaning

In a narrow sense, pragmatism is merely an *interpretation of meaning*. The pragmatic maxim is mainly concerned with solving problems. Problem solving as such incorporates the successful application of concepts, beliefs or theories in a particular situation. The main measure of success is the satisfactory outcome in regards to the problem to be addressed. Satisfaction, however, is a state of mind that occurs in the present moment and creates a logical problem as the present tense fails to provide meaning. Meaning can only be established through reflective experience.

At its core, experience enables the verification process of truth as it allows to retrospectively attributing meaning to our actions. The significance of experience, however, transcends much further: it is the starting point when a problem is encountered, the source for potential

solutions as well as the outcome of the tested solutions. In other words, the pragmatic concept of experience is threefold: firstly, it is the product of the interplay between objects and action; secondly, it enables the creation of practical knowledge by engaging in problem solving activities; thirdly, it serves as a point of reference for verifying the meaningfulness of an act. As a result, pragmatists consider experience as plural, equivocal and in constant flux. Problem solving becomes a process in which meaningfulness is created through the deliberate application of past experience, while new experiences are accumulated simultaneously. These meaningful activities lead to integration between problem and actor, respectively subject and object, which allows pragmatism to reject existing dualisms. This view of meaning is mainly associated with James and Dewey.

For Peirce, on the contrary, the meaning of any concept is merely the sum of its perceivable practical consequences. Peirce introduced this notion of meaning in his work *Fixation of Belief* (1877), in which he argued that the meaning of a word must be understood in regards to the habits associated with it. In the same way, meaning is established for any concept, belief, idea, or anything that acts as a sign. Peirce's interpretation leads to two conclusions: first, concepts without any perceivable practical consequences are meaningless; and second, if multiple concepts have the same practical consequences, the concepts are identical.

While Peirce's maxim deals mainly with the meaning of concepts, it is often perceived as his notion of pragmatic truth. However, it is in fact just an application of the criterion of meaning to the concept of truth. Peirce defines truth as the state of a belief that ultimately has to be agreed upon by all who investigate, making truth independent of the individual. Peirce's truth is therefore closer to the natural sciences than James, Dewey or Schiller. Influenced by his scientific background, Peirce's truth is ultimately achieved through endless *abductive inference*. Abduction, as opposed to induction or deduction, is a form of inquiry that starts

with a problem and then iteratively rejects or verifies varieties of possible explanations, before arriving at the best explanation, which allows the *fixation of a belief*. To other pragmatists, Peirce's proximity to the natural sciences increased the distinction. To avoid criticism, Peirce later renamed his doctrine *pragmatism*. A major point of critique is the perception that pragmatism is more than a philosophy of meaning; it is a philosophy of truth.

Interpretation of Truth

In a broad sense, pragmatism is an *interpretation of truth* that disregards the traditional notion of objective truth entirely. Many pragmatists promote an instrumental version of truth in which *true is what works*, implying that something is true as long and as it is advantageous to believe so. For James, truth is made in the course of human experiences and cannot be separated from the context or the human actor. Any form of knowledge, a belief or a scientific concept *becomes* true through its successful application in a particular context. Two entwined aspects must be highlighted in regards to the pragmatic notion of truth: truth is provisional and truth results in practical consequences.

First, for pragmatists there is no single absolute truth; there are multiple truths out there, all of which are context dependent. Truth is only provisional and therefore always subject to fallibility by further human inquiries. In other words, something is true as long as it provides a satisfactory practical consequence. Truth is simply the currently best knowledge available for a particular purpose. Hence, it is legitimate to believe in these provisional truths. A true believer is however constantly tested in everyday life through the human process of pragmatic inquiry. The aim of the process of inquiry is not to produce a final and objective truth. The process of inquiry verifies or rejects the problem solving ability of a particular

truth in a certain context. Nevertheless, a particular belief does not become truer, even though it has been verified numerous times, since pragmatism rejects an absolute notion of truth. Despite an exceptionally high number of verifications, there may still be situations in which the belief fails to provide a satisfactory outcome.

Secondly, pragmatic truth must be investigated in correspondence to practical consequences, precisely the satisfactory outcome of a meaningful action. For James, truth is the ability of an action – undertaken in correspondence to existing beliefs – to provide satisfactory consequences and is thus concerned with the relations of certain past experiences to new experiences. In a practical sense, the relation of action to satisfactory outcomes is to be seen as the achievement of a purpose through intentional practice. Truth can therefore occur on an individual level through personal experiences, and is not the property of an objective outside world; truth is not limited to time, persons or circumstances. Accepting truth on an individual level implies a certain level of subjectivity that allows non-experimentally testable concepts to be claimed true.

In this interpretation of pragmatic truth, scientific theories, beliefs or ideas become instruments to *make* things true. For James, something becomes true as long as it helps the inquirer to get satisfactory results in relation to other parts of our experience. In that sense, facts, whether in form of theories, ideas, or scientific concepts are not true per se; they are only true when one experiences their practical consequence in particular situations.

The pragmatic concepts of truth and experience are deeply entwined. In fact, truth is considered as part of our ongoing experience. In that sense, action research must not only be informed by scientific theories, it must also include practical experiences in the form of testing and verified by practical hands-on experiences that enables future actions to take place in meaningful ways. Whilst the process of pragmatic inquiry is experimental by nature –

since every situation is inherently different – meaningful experiences provide comfort and guidance for future acts.

Critical Comments

Pragmatism is a multifaceted philosophy that has been applied and conceptualized in many different ways and professions. It is a doctrine whose supporters have always been engaged in critical internal debates: For instance, Peirce and James, whose disagreement about fundamental assumptions of pragmatism led Peirce to rename his version of pragmatism into pragmaticism, or the more contemporary debate between Rorty and Haack, which shows that the pragmatic philosophy is still vibrant and alive. While this internal disagreement enabled the field to flourish and grow, the conflict is also a growing ground for criticisms, especially for those who strive for certainty.

Critics argue that pragmatism lacks explicitness and rigor, as it does not aim to uncover certainty. Pragmatism therefore cannot be seen as a process of scientific inquiry, making it relativistic in its core. The main concern is: if there is no way of finding absolute truth or certainty, how can we know that something is better than another? Certainty as a philosophical concept is not addressed in pragmatic philosophy, as we can never know whether something is absolute. Pragmatism as a non-dualist philosophy rejects the object-subject categorization, which is a pre-condition for certainty: something that is however promoted by dualist philosophies, such as positivism. Pragmatists believe that object and subject cannot be separated and are therefore intersubjectively connected. More precisely, *intersubjectivity* describes the state in which subject and objects impact and shape each other

in the everyday practice. It erases the subject-object division, which makes it impossible to uncover objective or absolute certainty, or truth.

The pragmatists address the issue of certainty by systematically bridging theories and experience. Truth is merely determined by the problem solving ability of theories or any other form of knowledge. Theories are merely tools that become true through successfully solving a particular problematic situation. This process is inherently rigorous, as theories or scientific knowledge is often formulated in a precise and structured way. One can never know for certain whether a specific theory solves a certain problem; even though it has been verified multiple times. Theories are therefore constantly tested, verified, and falsified by a practical community of inquiry. This verification process then leads to experiences, and subsequently formalised knowledge.

Pragmatic Knowledge

The pragmatic concept of knowledge, and the way it is acquired and explained is attractive for action researchers. Mainly promoted by Dewey, pragmatism opposes the view that knowledge exists independent of the knower, reducing the role of the knower to that of a mere observer. For the pragmatist, knowledge acquisition is subject to the occurrence of an actual problem that demands a concrete response, and thus the active participation of an actor in a problem solving process; it is not the quality of a practice-detached mind. *Indeterminate situations* – the term that Dewey uses to describe a problem – are the conditions that result in inquiry. Knowledge acquisition is the process of successfully solving an intermediate situation, which involves reorganizing, verifying and testing multiple resolutions. Knowledge is therefore necessarily experimental and only the reflection of a successful problem solving

act results in meaningful knowledge, which implies that there is no pure *a priori* knowledge. Knowledge does not exist independently from the context in which it arises. That in turn does not, however, entail that a problem can only be solved with one particular process of inquiry. Different inquiries can lead to similar practical consequences or result in an equally satisfactory solution for the problem.

There is always a human contribution to any form of knowledge as researchers are active participants in the making of our world. Researchers are never mere spectators; their thoughts and actions constitute the inquiry process of solving a problem. Pragmatism rejects all dualisms and therefore does not differentiate between knowing and acting, meaning that action is seen as a necessary component when acquiring knowledge, rather than a contaminating factor. Problem solving actions are based on existing knowledge, which, after reflection, results in new knowledge. This newly acquired knowledge is then the starting point for problems encountered in the future. This inquiry process is synonymous with the action research cycle and highlights the entanglement of actor, action and knowledge in the process of inquiry. For pragmatists, any knowledge claim is therefore simply a point of departure for the problem solving process; and not a definite solution. The focus on the problem to be solved, rather than the existing knowledge as such, makes pragmatism well positioned to deal with the complexity of modern research challenges, whether it is in science, social science or philosophy.

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See also: Dewey, John, Peirce, Charles Sanders, Practical Knowing, Pragmatic Action Research, Reflective Practice

Further Readings:

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