

COMPANION TO PRAGMATISM¹

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It is not much of an exaggeration to contend that over the course of the past couple of decades Western philosophy has experienced a distinctive shift which may be called a “pragmatic turn.” Several reasons for this spontaneous intellectual move can be identified. First and foremost, in the first half of the twentieth century it gradually became increasingly clear that the initially extremely promising project of analytic philosophy, approaching traditional intellectual puzzles from the standpoint of linguistic analysis exclusively is destined to reach its limitations soon. Second, within Europe, the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein (notwithstanding the difficulties of unequivocally identifying this thinker either with analytic or continental philosophy) paved the way for a radical paradigm shift, in which the use of long-standing visual and speculative metaphors of traditional philosophy was abandoned in favor of a serious look at the concept of action. The recent revival of the philosophy of pragmatism, it could thus be maintained, has not come out of the blue but should be viewed rather as a complex answer to the difficulties in which philosophy as a discipline found itself in the first half of the last century. Currently, the term “pragmatism” is used to refer to an incredibly broad collection of doctrines not only in philosophy but also in politics, education, economics, cultural theory and so on. Regardless of how positive this move may seem, it pushes us with an increasing urgency towards the need to seriously consider the following questions: What in fact is pragmatism? Is there any hallmark of this intellectual current linking its particular cultural manifestations by means of some central concept or idea? From this review’s perspective, precisely these kind of concerns form the central topic of the endeavours of the international team of twelve authors who, under the editorial leadership of Sami Pihlström, contributed to the notable volume, titled *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism* (2011a). Special regard should also be granted to Michael Eldridge, its co-editor and significant contributor, who unexpectedly passed away on 18 September, 2010. The volume as a whole was thus dedicated to the memory of the “pragmatist Socrates”, as his friends used to call him.

¹ Pihlström, S. (Ed). (2011). *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism*. London & New York (NY): Continuum International Publishing Group, xv + 307 pp.

The core of the volume is to be found in fifteen substantial essays written by leading international experts in their respective fields. In addition, the volume contains a glossary, elucidating the most important pragmatist concepts and familiarizing the reader with the key characters of the pragmatist movement. Moreover, the very closing chapters of the book contain a chronology and lists of resources for further study. This reader-friendly approach of the editors is to be highly valued for it makes the volume easily accessible even to those who lack any familiarity with pragmatism and helps them situate this movement onto firm historical, philosophical and conceptual grounds. At the same time, these additional accounts are far from banal. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. In the *Glossary*, in particular, the authors (Pihlström and Eldridge), in as clear language as possible, pay careful attention to concise, yet correct and informative, accounts of the key terms and figures of the pragmatist tradition. Unfortunately, they have not fully avoided some factual errata.²

An introductory study of pragmatism by Sami Pihlström provides the reader with an important overview of this intellectual tradition since the time of its “pre-history” (Emerson, Thoreau) up to its recent neo-pragmatist variants represented by Rorty or Putnam. Given the philosophical accomplishment of Pihlström there is no need to scrutinize the factual side of his account of the general development of pragmatism. On the other hand, we may definitely question its general heuristic direction. In his research, Pihlström specializes in inquiries into the influences of Kant’s philosophy on the development of the pragmatist tradition and out of this nexus he tries to bring forth new solutions to some philosophical problems (2005, 2011). However much the author of this review is sympathetic to this kind of project, it may seem that in this particular case Pihlström drags the general account of the development of pragmatism too far into Kantian territory at the expense of other important influences, like that of Hegel for instance. Obviously, it must be granted that in giving a thorough account of the Kantian impact on the evolution of pragmatism, Pihlström is not by any means wrong (Peirce, James, Mead and Dewey were all deeply versed in Kant) but on the other hand, Hegel’s influence in this chapter is seriously underestimated and in the whole chapter Pihlström refers to him only twice (each time in relation to Royce, a thinker whose philosophical project was of rather a non-pragmatist kind). As a result, the socio-historical aspect of pragmatism is, in a way, side-tracked. Although this deficiency in the introductory chapter is rather undesirable, in the light of its author’s intent, it is, however, quite understandable. With extreme clarity and substantial insight he advocates the important idea that pragmatism is a naturalized version of Kantian philosophy. This kind of pragmatic reconstitution of Kant’s transcendental philosophy enables us to understand that even though we have to acknowledge that our world is constructed through the cognitive capacities of our mind, we still do not have to give up on its objectivity. Nonetheless, should we call this kind of approach “transcendental idealism” (p. 7) as Pihlström suggests? There are certainly very good reasons for being very careful with this kind of vocabulary. Despite this terminological extravagance, Pihlström’s ideas are extremely insightful and definitely thought-provoking, which is the best the reader can get. The introductory chapter provides a well-grounded and resourceful treatment of the relation between Peirce’s and James’ versions

² In reading this particular chapter at least one factual error can be found (the name of G. H. Mead’s student at the University of Chicago and his important follower—Herbert Blumer, p. 36).

of pragmatism with many valuable insights. What also should be pointed out is Pihlström's analysis of the pragmatic aspects of the work of Carnap, Quine, Sellars and others. In this regard, he quite correctly emphasizes the problems with calling Quine a "pragmatist", for instance. On the flip side, however, it should be noted that it would be unnecessary to go too far with this disclaimer. What Pihlström left unnoticed, for example, is Quine's concept of naturalized epistemology and proclaimed behaviourism, further developed by Davidson. As for the former, it bears a strong resemblance to the pragmatist dismissal of traditional epistemology in favour of the experimental method of the natural sciences; the latter, in turn, is Quine's explicit (see Quine 1968) continuation of Dewey's naturalistic social psychology and the disposition theory of meaning. Pihlström's chapter reads very well and at its end, accomplished scholars of pragmatism will surely welcome, for instance, the concise, yet informative, sub-chapter on the "geography of pragmatism", and especially its Nordic variation.

The subsequent section analyzes the notion of pragmatic method, its various dimensions and possible ways of using it. Here Pihlström work is meritorious. If his insightful remarks on the proper meaning of the pragmatic method do not help suppress the numerous and often (unfortunately) uninformed arguments against pragmatism, it is hard to imagine what else could. Particular emphasis is placed on reading the pragmatic method as a meta-method, which may be used to evaluate different philosophical methods (phenomenological reduction, conceptual analysis, transcendental arguments, etc). In this sense, the pragmatic method should not be used as a rival to those mentioned above but rather as a sort of criterion to aid us in accurately choosing between them in order to solve problems that arise in the course of our action and deliberative inquiry. Pihlström further develops this in four problem-areas – metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, axiology and the philosophy of religion. If we were to single out one characterization of the way he deals with these issues, the word "balance" is probably the best one. This especially applies to his way of dealing with metaphysical issues like the notion of the contextuality of metaphysical (ontological) commitments. Drawing heavily on Kant, Pihlström shows that from the Kantian-pragmatist perspective, spatio-temporal objects really exist "outside us" and in this sense, are scheme-independent, empirically speaking, that is. At the same time, however, they are transcendently dependent on our conceptualizing practices. Hence, pragmatism may easily maintain the discourse of scheme-dependence vs. scheme-independence *distinction*, whereas, on the other hand, it can easily dismiss the corresponding *dualism*. In other words, pragmatism has to *weaken* (to use Gianni Vattimo's parlance) strong dichotomies of the above-mentioned kind in order to keep them in a more modest but still very useful form. While absolute scheme-independence does not make much sense to pragmatism, the relative one, resembling Quine's notions of theory-dependence, ontological commitment and posits, surely does. As Pihlström repeatedly mentions, though, we have to be careful with these kinds of comparisons since pragmatism cannot accept as strong a linguification of philosophy as the one presented in the more recent works of so-called neo-pragmatists like Quine, Rorty or Putnam. As for the philosophy of mind, the author of this chapter correctly remarks that the pragmatist treatment of this classical modern discipline of philosophy will have to question its very subject in the first place. Since the time of Peirce's criticism of Cartesianism it has been clear that pragmatism cannot view the domain of mind as an independent platform of inquiry. From the pragmatist

perspective, what we call the mind is a function of living organisms creatively operating in their environment. The dynamic cognitive capacities that can be subsumed under the term “mind” thus straddle the brain-body-environment chain and cannot be exclusively located in any of them. Along these lines of reasoning, the mind should be viewed more in functional than substantial terms. The recently thriving literature on the natural philosophy of mind (see Barrett (2011), Clark (2008), Chemero (2009), Noë (2006, 2009), Rowlands (2003, 2006, 2010), Shapiro (2010), Thompson (2007), etc.) suggests that precisely this approach, i.e. an action-oriented line of philosophical inquiry into the field of mind might be extremely intellectually fruitful in the near future.

Whereas over the past few decades, it could be argued, pragmatism has gained considerable recognition in fields like social theory, politics or law, the situation in the so-called “core disciplines” of philosophy, such as metaphysics or epistemology, is far more complicated. From today’s point of view, it seems that the philosophy of pragmatism still requires a good number of apologists for its views on concepts like truth, knowledge or justification. Precisely this task is taken up by John Capps in his chapter on the pragmatic theory of logic, epistemology and inquiry. Capps definitely does a very good job of outlining the main points of pragmatist epistemology; his accounts are concise, yet insightful and informative. However, his division of pragmatism into a normative (ethics, social theory, etc.) and descriptive wing (epistemology, theory of science) is perhaps a little problematic; especially, if we want to seriously debate pragmatism along with contemporary epistemology and the philosophy of science which, for that matter, also perceives itself as a serious normative endeavour. Against the background of Jamesian and Peircean accounts of truth, Capps accurately points out that what the pragmatists actually strive for is to turn the discussion from its long-term abstract level, which views truth as a kind of ideal relation between our ideas and the world, into some sort of a “phenomenology of truth”, which aims at discovering what role this category plays in our everyday actions. In this respect, Capps is definitely right in saying that the epistemology of pragmatism is to a great extent descriptive. Nonetheless, it seems that if today’s pragmatism wants to challenge the mainstream epistemology; it has to find a way of enriching or even reformulating its own views on truth and justification in such a manner as to be able to engage in those debates at the level of norms, not only descriptions. This definitely could be done and although, at certain moments, Capps seems to be heading towards formulating a conclusion of this kind, he never really reaches it and skips to another issue. At this point, the reader might feel that there is a sense of increasing repetitiveness in the volume as a whole when it comes to issues like truth and justification. While, on the one hand, it has to be admitted that the pragmatist epistemological theories have to be patiently articulated over and over again in an accurate manner, the informed reader is definitely going to expect something more. What would the classical pragmatist response be to, for instance, recent assertoric-discourse-centred accounts of truth, that also tend to call themselves “pragmatic” (see Price 2011)? Sadly, the reader will not get an answer. What should be valued, though, is Capps’ references to the work of some recent epistemologists (John Hawthorne, Jason Stanley, Keith DeRose, and Penelope Maddy), whose work bears resemblance to and could benefit from the philosophy of pragmatism.

Larry Hickman’s chapter, called “Science and Technology”, is certain to attract the reader’s attention as well. Its main goal is to emphasize the intimate relation between the

philosophy of pragmatism and the experimental sciences. As Hickman points out, each of the three major founding pragmatists were at some point in their lives engaged with empirical science. This characteristic is reflective of pragmatism in two ways. First, it heavily influenced the way in which pragmatism moved away from traditional speculative philosophy and towards consequences-oriented and practical intellectual deliberation, resulting in a reformulation of the very basic concept of what philosophy actually is. Second, in opposition, for instance, to the late Heidegger and the first generation of the Frankfurt school, it was able to incorporate the concept of scientific culture into its positive, melioristic vision of society. Pragmatism thus avoids the undesirable dualism between the nature of man and the allegedly threatening technological takeover of our life-world. A close relationship between science, technology and human experience could also be found in Dewey's notion of scientific conceptions, which he regarded as instruments; in other words, they are man-made provisional tools that come into existence in the course of our dealings with the environment, either physical or social. Eventually, Hickman successfully argues in favour of Dewey's naturalization of technology and its incorporation into our strivings for social reconstruction.

Over the past couple of decades, pragmatic aesthetics has gained a somewhat better reputation than, for example, its moral theory. Answering the question as to why this is the case forms to a great extent the agenda of Armen T. Marsoobian in his chapter on the pragmatic theory of aesthetics. The first germs of this theory are, from his point of view, to be found in the work of Emerson, who, in turn, considerably influenced Nietzsche and his European followers. The Emersonian concept of art as spontaneous and non-representational creative activity gained significant recognition on both sides of the Atlantic during the last century. There is, however, a significant idiosyncrasy in American aesthetics. As opposed to the European concept of art, since the time of Emerson, American aesthetics has exhibited a significant tendency to engage in education and the practical social goals of cultural politics. We cannot study art merely for the sake of its own appreciation. This normative conception of art finds its further expression and refinement in Dewey's philosophy. In this respect, Marsoobian draws the readers' attention towards the historical context in which Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics came into existence. He claims that in the mid-1920s Dewey became highly interested in fine art (especially painting) due to his friend, former student and art collector, Albert C. Barnes. Marsoobian argues that this shift in Dewey's interest considerably influenced the eventual structure and content of his *Carus Lectures* in 1925, which appeared that year as his magnum opus *Experience and Nature*. That particular fact is surely not very widely known and, actually, might well make us re-think Dewey's whole metaphysics. Marsoobian proceeds precisely in this direction and makes a compelling case urging us to view Dewey's metaphysics through the prism of aesthetics. In Dewey's opinion, the aesthetic is a matter of degree, not kind, and hence, every experience contains, in some rudimentary sense, the traits of the aesthetic. The analysis of various forms of experience should, therefore, always take into account their aesthetic dimensions. Quite a number of philosophers have taken up this project in recent decades, which is why the closing part of Marsoobian's treatment of the pragmatic aesthetics is devoted to its contemporary phenomenological (Arnold Berleant), historical-hermeneutical (Joseph Margolis) and embodied (Richard Shusterman) versions.

Michael Eldridge's chapter on pragmatic ethics is undoubtedly one of the best in the whole volume. The author's main goal is to point to the potential of pragmatism as a moral theory. Eldridge identifies several sources of pragmatic ethical theory like Scottish common sense realism, transcendentalism, various forms of post-Kantian idealism or even British hedonistic utilitarianism. Pragmatic ethics is thus an outcome of growing dissatisfaction with those theories. Particularly in the early stages of the development of American pragmatism, the ethical strain cannot be easily identified, although some ideas on moral philosophy are scattered through the works of Peirce, and even more so in James. This is exactly what Eldridge observes when he writes: "Indeed, there is some question if there could ever be a well-worked out pragmatic ethics given the historicity and meliorism advocated by James and embraced by later pragmatists" (p. 128). The main problem with engaging pragmatic ethics in discussion with other currents of moral philosophy is the radically different vocabulary it uses. The main discontinuity between pragmatic ethics and the rest of moral philosophy lies, it could be argued, in its anti-essentialism (often misrepresented as relativism) on the one hand, and the preservation of the concept of objective moral values on the other. This applies to recent Rortyan ethics as well as the Deweyan ones. However, as Eldridge accurately points out, there is a crucial difference between those two with regard to the process by means of which we arrive at solutions to moral problems. In Rorty's case, sentiment plays the decisive part, whereas in Dewey, the process of moral deliberation takes the form of scientific inquiry. In Eldridge's opinion, though, it is not easy to tell how these two approaches could be reconciled. That is why he seems to be highly sympathetic to Putnam's moral ideas which he holds in high regard, especially for their sustained attack on the fact/value dichotomy, common to both Dewey and Rorty. At the end of the chapter, the reader is presented with a brief account of contemporary variants of pragmatic ethics, promoted by thinkers like John Rawls, Jennifer Welchman, Charlene Seigfried and Hugh LaFollette.

The area of humanities on which the philosophy of pragmatism has had the biggest impact over the last century is, arguably, social theory. What is, however, the main subject of sociology? There has been a discussion as to whether the, so to say, "cement" of society lies in its more or less static structures or in what the members of society actually do, i.e. social action. In his chapter on the relation between pragmatism and social theory, Erkki Kilpinen advocates the latter option. Although this fact is not widely recognized, Kilpinen maintains that each of the four classic pragmatists made crucial contributions to our present concept of social action. Peirce's interpretation of logic delineates the pragmatist conception of action in general and James' important insights (the social self, the elaboration of the Peircean notion of habit, etc.) embodied in his crucial work *Principles of Psychology* should be viewed, for example, as foundations of the actual pragmatic theory of society as we know it from the work of Mead and Dewey. Kilpinen's high regard for G. H. Mead should be greatly valued. Although this thinker is known rather as a social psychologist and sociological classic, Kilpinen interprets him as "a psychologically oriented philosopher of mind and theorist of action" (p. 139). The author of this paper could not agree more with this kind of outlook on Mead's work. Indeed, the reception of Mead's philosophy in the last century has been extremely fragmentary and deserves a much wider approach, not only the one limited to the implications of his ideas for social psychology and sociology. If we want to do justice to the spirit of Mead's philosophy, we have to start off with his concept of social action. And this is

exactly what Kilpinen does. The concept of social action is one of the focal points of Mead's work as a whole. Capitalizing on the Peircean concept of habit, Kilpinen highlights the revolutionary potential of the pragmatist theory of action, which lies mainly in the fact that it reverses what we could call the “mind-first-explanation” of action. In opposition to classical social theories based more or less on Cartesian presuppositions, what pragmatism actually does is nothing less than execute a “Copernican turn” in the philosophy of action because it provides us with quite a plausible picture of how the mind as such comes into existence as a result of the social acts of the members of society. Not only is this account philosophically and logically coherent but, as Kilpinen shows, with reference to neurophilosophers like Radu J. Bogdan, it is also empirically responsible (to use Mark Johnson's expression). Along the lines of Mead's and Dewey's arguments, Kilpinen contends that it is not individual but social action that should be viewed as an original and basic form of human action. On the basis of these findings, Kilpinen further criticizes rational action theory, currently still prevalent in mainstream economic theories and tries to prove that their explanatory frameworks could be undermined by means of the revolutionary insights of the classical pragmatists.

With regard to the abovementioned remarks, on the one hand, and the recent goings-on in the world economy on the other, it seems, indeed, that Western culture is in a desperate need of a re-think on its very basic economical principles and postulates. In this respect, if pragmatism wants to be taken seriously as a social philosophy, it has to come up with substantial ideas that can make an actual difference to the current cheerless situation in the global economy and political situation. An outline of what a pragmatist economy is and how it could respond to these problems has been provided by Paul B. Thompson. In his chapter, Thompson points out to growing efforts in contemporary theoretical economics towards building a new methodological framework based on Dewey's theory of inquiry. These endeavours, however long they may have been around, have lately gained new relevance, especially in the work of Karl Polanyi and Daniel Bromley. Pragmatist (institutional) economics came into existence through critical discussions with mainstream theoretical apologetic currents of the precipitous capitalism of the first half of the last century. As opposed to the concept of the self-interested “economic man” dating back to the time of John S. Mill (along with its twentieth century mirrorings in the work of Friedman), institutional economics tries to expose this kind of economical anthropology as being a product of a specific culture in which people live and its material practices. Rational calculation and the pursuit of self-interest are not fixed elements of human nature. Rather, in their essence, they are contingent outcomes of shared habits, practices and formal policies. This identification, I believe, enables us to demonstrate the basic shortcomings of the prevalent neo-liberal free-market paradigm and possible failings deeply ingrained within it when put into practice. Such a critique can be carried out on various levels of philosophical and social reflection. For this specific reason, Thompson insightfully analyzes the work of Karl Polanyi and his theory of prices. Polanyi's theories attempt to set out an account of how fluctuations brought about by creating prices for labour, natural resources and credit in spontaneous and unmanaged market processes may cause political and social distress and eventually the destabilization of the economic process itself. In turn, Polanyi sees a dysfunctional economy creating misery and suffering for people as being morally wrong. Hence, our current economic system, given the absence of political institutions that would give political voice to labour and natural

resources, is likely to gradually take on irrational, utopian and repressive forms. Since institutions define and specify opportunity sets and fields of action for the members of a particular economic system, we have to come up with an appropriate pattern for the process of their desired reconstruction. At this point the theories of Daniel Bromley come into play. Thompson, in this respect, emphasizes (unexpectedly but with a full *ratio*) the necessity of incorporating into the new economy the notion of warranted assertability, which connects Dewey's theory of inquiry with possible reconstructive models of our economic institutions.

The last thematic chapter is devoted to the relation between pragmatism and religion. No school of thought in the postmodern era can demand general recognition if it does not have a clear take on the problem of religion. An outline of how we might think about religion in terms of pragmatism is put forth in the volume by Ulf Zackariasson. The position of pragmatism with respect to religion is inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, its proclaimed naturalism can be viewed, at first glance, as a significant obstacle to serious reflection on religion. On the other, however, pragmatic pluralism and a focus on the consequences of our ideas, beliefs and concepts provides leeway for religious views. A very interesting and balanced view of the possible applicability of the pragmatic method to religion has already been presented by Sami Pihlström in chapter 3 of the volume, where he advocates a more modest approach to religion than the one, for instance, currently presented by militant atheists like Dennett or Dawkins. Pragmatism tends to understand religiosity primarily as a certain set of human practices with certain inherent aims and goals, responding to specific needs and interests, i.e. serving certain human values. What we do have to abandon is the search for some neutral perspective out of which we would be able to adjudicate the controversy between science and religion, atheism and theism, and so on. In his chapter, Zackariasson builds his position precisely along these lines of thought. What definitely seems to be out of the question for pragmatism is its engagement in debates over the ontological status of the object of religious belief. Moreover, it concentrates on what a religious belief is and how it functions in our practical lives. Pragmatists are prepared to accept the “good”, including the religious “goods” as long as religious belief does not create problems in other areas of our experience. This, to a certain extent, applies to James' as well as Dewey's views on the matter. In the work of both of these thinkers, religious beliefs seem to be tied ultimately to (ideal) values more than to any kind of supernatural being(s). Zackariasson covers all the important aspects of the pragmatic treatment of religion. From the perspective of this review's author, however, one important aspect has been left unnoticed. Namely it is the overlapping between neopragmatism and contemporary post-modern Christianity apologists such as John D. Caputo or Gianni Vattimo. As G. Elijah Dann (2006) argues, for instance, the mutual encounters of those two progressive currents of today's philosophy are very likely to bring about some fruitful ideas for our reflections on the future position of religion in society. Surprisingly, it might be Rorty's philosophy that can help us re-think anew the issue of religion and help facilitate it in the post-modern situation. If Zackariasson had incorporated this line of reasoning, his chapter would have surely gained even greater argumentative power and relevance.

Apart from the sections briefly reviewed in this paper, the volume contains, in addition, chapters on the history of pragmatism (James Campbell), politics (Shane J. Ralston), education (Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon) and race (Shannon Sullivan) as well as a chapter on

future trends and directions within this intellectual movement (Sami Pihlström). All of these chapters bring important, highly accomplished and fully dependable insights into various aspects of the philosophy of pragmatism. In conclusion, *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism* is an important contribution to contemporary pragmatist scholarship. With its scope, insightfulness and accessibility it is likely to become one of the most important secondary sources on pragmatism for years to come.

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