ADJECTIVAL AND GENERIC PRAGMATISM: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract: While honoring the suggestion that one should always use an adjective with "pragmatism," I explore the possibility of a generic use of the term, contending that an orientation to habit or revisable practice is a useful indicator.
Keywords: Pragmatism; habit; practice; action theory; neo-pragmatism.

The difference between the Greek conception of human nature and the post-Darwinian, Deweyan conception is the difference between closure and openness . . .
This element of romantic hope, this willingness to substitute imagination for certainty, and curiosity for pride, breaks down the Greek distinction between contemplation and action. Dewey saw that distinction as the great incubus from which intellectual life in the West needed to escape. His pragmatism was, as Hilary Putnam has said, an "insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view."
Richard Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," (1999, 88)

. . . a central—perhaps the central–emphasis with pragmatism
[is] the emphasis on the primacy of practice.
Hilary Putnam (1995, 52)

In May 2008, at a meeting of the Central European Pragmatist Forum in Brno, Czech Republic, Larry Hickman cautioned inclusive pragmatists such as myself not to speak of pragmatism *simpliciter*. He suggested that, given the variety of pragmatisms, we should always use an adjective to qualify the sort of pragmatism of which one speaks. This is good advice. One should not casually speak of the various pragmatisms as if they were a unitary phenomenon. As is well known there has been much confusion and disagreement about the meaning of the term since William James first used it publicly in his 1898 Berkeley address, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," but I think we can bring some order to the discussion. As a start, one should do as Hickman recommends and specify which version of pragmatism one has in mind. It is possible, however, that there is a generic pragmatism that can be specified, one that includes all or most of the various versions or perhaps one that can be used to explain many of the various uses. This paper is an attempt to sort out some of the prominent ones and identify

a possible inclusive, explanatory, or normative one. In other words, I want to honor Hickman's sage advice and yet avoid the hodgepodge that could result from a simple-minded adherence to this advice. If there can be sensible ordering of the many uses, I would like to do that.

Shortly I will consider Sami Pihlström's identification of four "perhaps overlapping" attitudes to "the pragmatic tradition." Note his use of the word "overlapping." Perhaps there is a family resemblance between the various attitudes. Indeed, Richard Bernstein (in Saatkamp1995, 66) once suggested that pragmatism's "similarities and differences are best characterized as family resemblances". He also in this same essay denied that "there is any 'essence' to pragmatism—or even a set of sharply defined commitments or propositions that all so-called pragmatists share (*ibid.*, 61)." Like Pihlström he argued for a "pragmatic tradition" (*ibid.*, 61), but one characterized by "a continuous series of explorations and controversies about persistent pragmatic themes" (*ibid.*, 55). So there is possibly an elusive attitude, orientation or set of "persistent themes" that could characterize generic pragmatism.

I have one more bit of stage setting to do before I get to the promised discussion of Pihlström's overlapping attitudes. So far our choices are no essence to pragmatism, but perhaps some common themes or attitudes. Also to be rejected, according to Joseph Margolis (2002, 2), is a shared method, the obvious candidate for which would be Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatic maxim, which I will take up shortly. Margolis thinks this maxim is too vague. He notes that it is "not entirely useless, but it is too slack" (*ibid.*, 12). Nor, I shall argue, does this approach adequately capture the character or diversity of the pragmatic tradition. It is, to be sure, of tremendous significance for the tradition and worth reflecting on, but it is too narrow to accomplish what I would like—a way to hold together the various pragmatisms. But I am getting ahead of myself, and so I take up Pihlström's suggestions.

The first two either limit pragmatism to Charles Sanders Peirce's version or give it primacy. The first will not do because clearly James should be considered a co-founder. Not only was he part of the discussions that led to Peirce's initial use of the term but he, as I noted, initially used the term publicly, proposing a variant understanding that provoked much discussion. Indeed James became the chief public exponent of pragmatism from 1898 to his death in 1910.

More sensible is Tom Burke's effort to tie pragmatism to Peirce's pragmatic maxim (2007). Burke agrees with many in thinking that pragmatism is "not a single philosophy." But he rejects the "family resemblance" suggestion, thinking rather that it is a "style or way of doing philosophy." In order "to qualify as pragmatist a philosophy need satisfy just one criterion: it must essentially and substantively endorse the pragmatic maxim." This maxim, which was originally put forward in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878), occurs at the end of the second section of the paper:

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 (1986, 266).

Burke then explains:

For a pragmatist, one's philosophical language takes actions and their effects as a semantic basis for devising theories and models of how the world works. This is what Peirce meant, I claim, by asserting that possible effects of possible actions must ground our fundamental terminology for formulating and clarifying our ideas. The latter couple of sentences constitute what I think is a more precise statement of the pragmatic maxim.

Note that on Burke's reading James would appear to be a pragmatist because he takes his cue from the pragmatic maxim.

But I am troubled in three closely related ways, all having to do with practices: One, Burke's understanding is semantically oriented. It enables us to discover meanings that enable us to understand "how the world works." I would like a fuller basis than semantics, for a semantic orientation, without being supplemented, leads only to understanding. My pragmatist hope is for more than understanding. I would like for the grounding to be in our practices. Two, there is no attention to the normative dimension. I take seriously Bernstein's observation, "Both Peirce and [Wilfrid] Sellars argue that an adequate account of concepts and language presupposes the acknowledgement of norms implicit in practices" (Davaney, Frisina 2006, 5). And three, the pragmatic maxim not only assumes but requires habits, the classic pragmatists' notion, or "practices," a more general and less misleading term.[1] So I am more comfortable with what comes next.

Many, such as Hickman, would embrace the third attitude (or some variant thereof). It insists on "the continuity of certain pragmatist themes in the classics of the movement, especially Peirce, James and Dewey (as well as Royce, Schiller, G. H. Mead, and C. I. Lewis), such as experience, purposiveness, human interests, continuity, creativity, growth, habits, dynamic action, non-reductive naturalism, etc." Pihlström then adds, "Those who adopt this approach usually insist that neopragmatists like Rorty almost entirely distort original pragmatism" (Pihlström 2008, 2). Pihlström himself adopts the fourth option, "which is prepared to admit that even Rorty's neopragmatism is part of the extremely heterogeneous tradition we call pragmatism" (*ibid.*, 2f). I am even more ecumenical, including those non-intellectual pragmatists who can be seen as attenuated pragmatists, such as the "everyday pragmatists" embraced by Richard Posner (2003, 49-56). In addition, one can insert a historical group between the classical and the neo-pragmatists, which Bernstein (1992, 827) and others have labeled, "analytic pragmatism".

One can make even finer distinctions as Arthur O. Lovejoy (1908) did a century ago or as many of us do when we distinguish Dewey from his predecessors (Sleeper 1986, 44-57) or note the disagreements between Rorty and Hilary Putnam (Margolis 2002; Hildebrand 2003). But for my purposes it is sufficient to focus on Pihlström's latter two—classical pragmatism and neo-pragmatism—and the two I have added—analytic and everyday pragmatism. I will proceed by discussing everyday pragmatism first, then go to the classical one, and finish by treating analytic and neo-pragmatism together, giving more attention to the former than the latter.

Everyday Pragmatism and Its Intellectual Defenders

For many pragmatism means expediency. One is not guided by principles but rather proceeds opportunistically doing "what works." This is often taken to be the common sense view of Americans, a can-do attitude that refuses to be bound by the past or by rules. Americans are "men of action," doers rather than thinkers. Thus education is valuable to the extent it

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[1] The idea that there is a pragmatic method deserves more attention than I give it here. Tom Burke continues to pursue the idea and is developing a fuller statement of his suggestion. Cornelis de Waal (2005) also thinks there is a pragmatic method that takes its cue from Peirce's maxim, but my initial impression is that he, despite his knowledgeable and insightful treatment of pragmatism, is vulnerable to Margolis' charge of slackness in his employment of the term "method."

prepares one for making a living. It is not something to be pursued for its own sake.

Two of everyday pragmatism's intellectual defenders are Richard Posner and Stanley Fish. Judge Posner writes (2003, 49f):

> Everyday pragmatism is the mindset denoted by the popular usage of the word "pragmatic," meaning practical and business-like, "no-nonsense," disdainful of abstract theory and intellectual pretension, contemptuous of moralizers and utopian dreamers. It long has been and remains the untheorized cultural outlook of most Americans, one rooted in the usages and attitudes of a brash, fast-moving, competitive, forward-looking, commercial, materialistic philistine society, with its emphasis on working hard and getting ahead.

One, of course, has to be wary of generalizations. Clearly one can find exceptions to this characterization of the "cultural outlook of most Americans," particularly when we have just been through a presidency characterized by rigidity and the considerable influence of the religious right. Moreover, President Barack Obama's pragmatism is regarded as refreshing, if not novel. Posner, to his credit, calls attention to the religious orientation of the United States and notes that this runs counter to the pragmatism he has been describing. Nevertheless there is a point to Posner's basic characterization. The observation, to be sure, is not original, as Posner notes, citing Tocqueville and others. But Posner wants to do more than describe this practical orientation; he wants also to contrast it with philosophical pragmatism, arguing that although they are consistent with one another they are nevertheless independent of each other. I accept both the consistency and independence points. Where we part company is in Posner's preference for everyday over philosophical pragmatism, arguing that the latter is of no use to judges.

Also disdainful of philosophical pragmatism is Stanley Fish, who argues that philosophical pragmatism has nothing to contribute outside its own realm—philosophy. It has valid points to make against other philosophies but "it has nothing to say to us; no politics follows from it or is blocked by it; no morality attaches to it or is enjoined by it" (in Dickstein 1998, 419). I think Fish is wrong about this and would point to the critical and reconstructive function of Dewey's instrumentalism, as do Michael Sullivan and Daniel Solove in their review of Posner's *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy*. It was not the classical pragmatist's intention that philosophy "underwrite our ordinary ways of talking and our common sense experience of the world," as Fish asserts (*ibid.*). Rather Dewey began with the practices and then asked, when he found them to be wanting, how they could be improved. But more of this line of thought in the next section. Now I want to call attention to what is common among the pragmatists. Fish more or less correctly says

> For after all, a pragmatist believes in the sufficiency of human practices and is not dismayed when those practices are shown to be grounded in nothing more (or less) than their own traditions and histories; the impossibility of tying our everyday meanings and values to meanings and values less local does not lead the pragmatist to suspect their reality, but to suspect the form of thought that would deny it (*ibid.*).

I agree that pragmatists of all stripes value practice; the issue is whether philosophy has a vital role to play in enhancing it. Fish is suspicious of all philosophy, including pragmatist philosophy. I am not. Practices may not have or need any warrant outside of practices, but a particular practice may be evaluated and possibly corrected or enhanced by insights gained elsewhere.

Habit-Oriented Pragmatism

Earlier I noted Burke's attempt to tie pragmatists to the pragmatic maxim. I like this move but think he has not identified the right criterion. One can know the meaning of a term by its effects precisely because the belief is a habit. One has developed a rule of action, or belief, that can be understood as a habit, a regular way of believing. In "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in the section that ends with the pragmatic maxim, Peirce declares that "what a thing means is simply what habits it involves." It is by tracing the effects of the belief that one can determine what the belief is—its meaning. Peirce goes on to say, "Now, the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act." Hence a belief is a habit (1986, 265).

Erkki Kilpinen, in his admirable book, *The Enormous Fly-wheel of Society: Pragmatism's Habitual Conception of Action and Social Theory*, argues that there is "a unified pragmatistic tradition . . . structured around a common conception of habitual action" (2000, 34). The metaphor of a fly-wheel is used by James in his chapter on habits in the *Principles of Psychology.* A fly-wheel is a wheel, such as a bicycle wheel that once set in motion tends to continue in motion. Accordingly, James refers to habit as society's "most precious conservative agent" (1950, 1.121). Dewey devotes the first of the four parts of *Human Nature and Conduct*, the sub-title of which is *An Introduction to Social Psychology,* to the role of habits. For the classical pragmatists habits are not mere routines and they can be good or bad. A habit, according to Dewey, is

> that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity [MW 14, 31].[2]

We act in characteristic ways. This conduct has inertia, but a habit can be modified. The pragmatic notion of reconstruction is the re-making of our habits to suit changes in our environments or changes in our purposes.

But my task in this paper is not to establish the centrality of habit for the classical pragmatists. This is well known. My job is to show how the other pragmatists can be tied to this understanding. Everyday pragmatism, of course, is focused on practice. But it is satisfied with unreflected-upon practice. What the classical, or habit-oriented, pragmatists have done is reflect on our everyday practices, understood quite broadly to include science, which was the practice that was most salient to Peirce, and develop this reflection into a theory of action which is at the heart of their philosophies. Peirce was interested in the semantic implications of our practices; James was interested in the practical difference a belief would make in one's life. Some, such a Ralph Barton Perry, have thought that James misunderstood Peirce [De Waal 2005, 30]. But on my reading they are each bringing out implications of our practices and the differences have to do with their differing interests.

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[2] References to Dewey's collected works (1969-1991), which have been published in three series as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW), and *The Later Works* (LW), are by the abbreviations and the volume and page number. So the reference in the text is to *The Middle Works,* vol. 14, p. 31.

Analytic and Neo-Pragmatism

As is well-known the attention of professional philosophers shifted away from idealism and pragmatism as the twentieth century progressed, becoming increasingly preoccupied with various realisms and by mid-century utterly captivated by the philosophy of science and philosophy of language. Not surprisingly, those philosophers who were concerned with education, public philosophy and the practical bearings of philosophy on individual and social life felt displaced by these developments. Those who fully participated in the linguistic turn yet identified to some extent with pragmatism included Morton White and W. V. O. Quine. I will concentrate on White because I think he is less well known and possibly more of a pragmatist than Quine. At least he was more within the pragmatic tradition and had more to say about pragmatism than Quine.

Morton White's Pragmatism

In many ways Morton White is a model of what I think a pragmatist philosopher should be. He, better than most, knew and interpreted with great insight the history of American philosophy, but he also engaged in the ongoing discussions of contemporary philosophy during his long career. Moreover, he did so as a distinguished academic at Harvard and the Institute for Advanced Study. Yet I regard his as a less robust pragmatism than that of the classical, habit-oriented pragmatists. It is more comfortably intellectual and academic. Yet I concede that his pragmatism may have been appropriate in the context of the period in which he was most active.

Intellectual Pragmatism

White sought to reconcile some of the competing movements in Anglo-American philosophy, notably positivism, analysis and pragmatism. The first two receive more attention in his *Toward a Reunion in Philosophy* than does pragmatism. Yet it is significant that when pragmatism was at what many regard as its nadir, White was placing pragmatists old and new in conversation with the prominent philosophers of the middle decades of the twentieth century and calling attention to the pragmatic aspects of the work of Rudolf Carnap and Quine. But what was the pragmatism that White thought was merging with the analytic movement? White (1956, 19; see also 299) thought that the descriptive metaphysics of Moore had given way to Carnap's pragmatism:

> This shift to pragmatism suggests what I mean when I call the most recent phase of analytic philosophy the age of decision. That age is characterized by an avoidance of the kind of blunt, straightforward nonlinguistic questions of Moore, . . . In place of these questions, the philosopher in the age of decision does not always formulate a question about how we actually *do* use language. He does not simply ask whether words *are* used in a certain way . . . To this extent he does more than engage in descriptive linguistics. He goes on to ask whether they *ought* to be used in a certain way, and it is here that the distinctive thesis of this book becomes directly relevant. It is here that we find a confluence of two currents in twentieth-century philosophy: one that runs from the early analytic Platonism of Russell and Moore through the pragmatic philosophizing of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey.

This is not a very robust pragmatism, calling attention as it does to the decisions that result in one's normative intellectual frameworks. But it is certainly descriptive of the pragmatism of

Quine in "The Two Dogmas of Empiricism." There Quine explicitly credits Carnap, his teacher, and not the classic American pragmatists. Moreover this is not the cultural criticism that White would later cite as one of the points of conflict between Quine and himself. And it is certainly not the societal criticism that we find in James, Dewey, Tufts and Mead. The public philosopher of fifty years earlier has become the academic philosopher whose world centers around Harvard and Oxford. Dewey's "problems of men" has clearly become the "problems of philosophers," a problem-solving exercise in which White distinguished himself. Nevertheless, in another cramped reference to the pragmatic tradition he associates himself with Quine's pragmatic "warping" of one's "scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings" (2002, 1) and William James' conservative modification of one's opinions (2002, 183). This suggests an adaptive approach to one's practices. But if one did not have the pragmatic theory of action in mind, s/he may well not see it in White.

I have taken some time in a limited essay to talk about White because he may be the limiting case on my understanding of pragmatism. He is either just inside the line or just beyond it. Clearly he identifies with the pragmatist tradition and he is insistent on a holism that he thinks is characteristic of pragmatism, but I do not find much attention to practice. He does understand pragmatism as a philosopher that works within our scientific heritage and modifying that inheritance as conditions warrant (2002, 1f and 183ff). So I am inclined to include him within the pragmatist tradition despite the lack of an explicit embrace of the pragmatic theory of action.

Rorty, Putnam and Neo-Pragmatism

Rorty and Putnam, however, do embrace the primacy of practices. Equally adept (but not always comfortable) with academic and analytic philosophy, they are more practice-oriented than White, as the epigraphs above indicate. Putnam explicitly says that practice is primary for the pragmatists. And the statement of Putnam's that Rorty cites regarding agency can be linked to the originary pragmatists' theory of action. Early in "Ethics without Principles" Rorty, in describing Dewey's understanding of morality, embraces the latter's Darwinian approach. He writes: "All three words [prudence, habit and custom] describe familiar and relatively uncontroversial ways in which individuals and groups adjust to the stresses and strains of their non-human and human environments (1999, 73)." What Rorty objects to is Dewey's generalization of Darwin into a metaphysics, but taken as a scientific understanding he shares the Darwinian approach.

I will not rehearse here the well-known Rortyian objection to Dewey's embrace of experience and method and his linguistification of pragmatism (1999, 35). Nor do I find Rorty's pragmatism as congenial as Dewey's. But, to Rorty's credit, he moved the analytic pragmatism that he encountered as a young philosopher in the direction of public philosophy, criticized analytic philosophy severely in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), and is generally regarded as the catalyst for the renewed interest in pragmatism in the latter part of the twentieth century.

What I find interesting in the context of this survey, however, is that where the every day pragmatists may downplay or eliminate theory, the analytic and neo-pragmatists focus on theory. At times each has neglected or even denied the critical-reconstructive function. Rorty, of course, attempted to take seriously the intellectual problems of analytic philosophy but he did pursue the classic pragmatist critical-reconstructive function even if he did not avail himself of all of the originary pragmatists' resources, notably their understanding of experience and their

valuation of method. Moreover his romantic, ironic liberalism and his embrace of ethnocentrism seem to many to be an unnecessary retreat from Dewey's robust, reconstructed liberalism. Even so, Rorty could be viewed has having attempted to bring together the "problems of men" approach of Dewey and the "problems of philosophers" one that Dewey resisted. A case could be made that Rorty, like White, was attempting to respond to the philosophical practices of their own times and thus were being pragmatic. But Rorty, unlike White, was explicit about the focus on practices.

Conclusion

There is a value in sorting out the various pragmatisms and asking if they have something in common. One would want to do so for the intellectual reason of correctly grouping that which can be grouped, but also for organizational and educational purposes. One may find that there are nominal pragmatists of varying orientations that could benefit from interaction with one another. There are also practical reasons. I think that academic pragmatists need to be reminded of the practical orientation of the everyday pragmatists, and the latter's complacency may well need to be disturbed from time to time. Also many of my fellow pragmatists in the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy have become insular, according to Robert Talisse (2007, 137). So there is value in identifying differing orientations and encouraging discussion across party lines. At any rate, as a good Deweyan pragmatist I am uneasy with dichotomies. Distinctions have their value. Thus I accept Hickman's warning. But when the degrees of separation become chasms, I fear that the potential of pragmatism will be unrealized. If one becomes too content on the intellectual side of the divide then one's pragmatism may well lose its practical and public edge.

So I have suggested that a possible identifier of a generic pragmatism is an attention to revisable practice. This is a "point of view," to employ the phrase Dewey once used. Dewey, in "The Development of American Pragmatism," identified a pragmatic point of view as one that pays attention to the "concrete instances and things of experiences" and seeks to improve them through intelligence. He wrote:

> . . . the fundamental categories have been cumulatively extended and reinforced because of their value when applied to concrete instances and things of experience. It is therefore not the origin of a concept, it is its application which becomes the criterion of its value; and here we have the whole of pragmatism in embryo [LW 2, 16].

Pragmatism, then, is a point of view that values and pays close attention to thinking and action that results in reconstructed, beneficial situations.

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