A PRIMER ON PRAGMATISM: METHOD

Posts in this series. This post is updated from time to time with additional resources.

This series is based on the work of Elizabeth Anderson, a philosopher who describes herself as a pragmatist. The next three posts will address basic ideas of pragmatism.* The texts for this post are two papers by Charles Sanders Peirce: *The Fixation of Belief*, and *How To Make Our Ideas Clear*, both by Charles Peirce, published in *Popular Science* in 1877 and 1878. Peirce (pronounced “Purse”) is one of the founders of pragmatism, and one of America’s great original thinkers. Here’s his Wikipedia entry, which explains why.

In Part III of the first paper, Peirce begins talking about the main subject of the paper, belief and doubt. From my very limited knowledge, this separates pragmatism from prior philosophical thought, which turned on truth and falsity. There is no reason to define belief and doubt, except to note that they arise in all human beings individually, as opposed to truth and falsity which are somehow independent of human beings, even though they are human words.

Peirce tells us that we know the difference “between the sensation of doubting and that of believing”. Beliefs guide our actions, as a habit does. Doubts make it hard for us to act. Belief is a comfortable, untroubled state of mind. Doubts are uncomfortable. They give rise to a struggle to settle them into belief. Peirce calls this struggle “inquiry, though it must be admitted that this is sometimes not a very apt designation”.

He says that the irritation created by doubt is the only thing that will drive us to inquiry. I’d guess that’s because inquiry can be really hard work, which we humans avoid when possible. We hold strongly to our beliefs, and don’t want

to change them. We go to great lengths to avoid doubt, because it would entail actual work.

We may think we want a true opinion, but Peirce disagrees.

> But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false. And it is clear that nothing out of the sphere of our knowledge can be our object, for nothing which does not affect the mind can be the motive for mental effort. The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall think to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so.

We have ideas, habits of the mind. We think they are true because we use them to guide our actions.** If it turns out well, we don't have to think about it anymore. But there is no reason to think we'll get it right the next time either; often what passes for inquiry is trial and error, and we hold to the new belief until it becomes painful and we are forced to work again. This is a cleansing idea. We could possibly learn to hold less firmly to our opinions so as to remain open to new ideas. We won't, though.

In Part V, Peirce describes four methods of settling doubt. First, tenacity. We cling to our first belief and refuse to acknowledge any doubt. This is really hard to do, because we are social creatures, and rub up against other humans in ways that cannot but create doubts about some of our certainties. Or so Peirce says. Observing my fellow citizens, I'm not so sure.

Second, some entity could settle all questions by legislating and enforcing approved propositions. That will work if the number of

propositions subject to authority is limited, but eventually it will fail.

Third, the a priori method. People sit around and talk in good faith about what they think, and truth emerges. It might sound good, but garbage in garbage out. And with that, Peirce dismisses metaphysics.

Finally, there is the appeal to reality, a permanence outside our thought processes and unaffected by them. Peirce proposes the scientific method.

> Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language, is this: There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion.

That’s exactly the approach to human beings and their habits of thought that attracts me to pragmatism. I note that it works really well for the physical sciences, but it is much harder to apply it to human constructs like institutions and governments, and to social interactions.

The second paper is devoted to a discussion of reality. It’s main point is that

> … reality, like every other quality, consists in the peculiar sensible effects which things partaking of it produce. The only effect which real things have is to cause belief, for all the sensations which they excite emerge into consciousness in the form of

> beliefs. Part IV.

All of our senses produce effects in the mind when stimulated. When we find regularities, we formulate theories based on those regularities Theories that seem to work form our beliefs.

Beyond those things available to the senses, there is nothing of interest in the physical world. Humans invent tools to increase the range of sensations, such as microscopes, UV sensors, and radio detectors. Those things do not change the nature of reality. They simply reveal more of it to our senses.

This approach discards centuries of philosophical thought on matters like the distinction between appearance and reality. These and many other long-standing philosophical issues disappear in Peirce's theory. They are useless because they do not raise doubts as to how we should act, or raise doubts about our beliefs.

Then Peirce explains how this method enables us to settle our opinions. We use different methods to come to agreement on specific issues, always subject to change or even rejection. He gives the example of the speed of light, offering a number of different methods of estimating it. As different people work out different methods, the answers begin to converge and we get better estimates. At the end there is always an error factor, so the measurement may never be perfect. But no one thinks the answer is a fiction. We assign an error factor and use the best estimate in further calculations and for future efforts to plumb reality.

We could use a similar process to form new beliefs. As William James puts it in his book *Pragmatism* available online here:

> No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. THE ATTITUDE OF LOOKING AWAY FROM FIRST THINGS, PRINCIPLES, 'CATEGORIES,' SUPPOSED

> NECESSITIES; AND OF LOOKING TOWARDS LAST THINGS, FRUITS, CONSEQUENCES, FACTS.
> Lecture II
> (Emphasis in original.)

Pragmatists work from observable facts. They ignore “first principles”, for example, the Natural Law or the principles of Galen or the categories of Aristotle. Sacred texts and religious dogmas are irrelevant. Classifications of reality must stand the test of usefulness for identifiable purposes.

In the next post I’ll discuss James’ views of truth in pragmatism. then I’ll take up some partial conclusions.

=====

* H/T to PartiallyExaminedLife.com for links to Peirce and James. The podcast discusses these works in Episodes 20 and 22.

** This idea sounds a lot like Bourdieu’s term “habitus”.