

A PRIMER ON PRAGMATISM: TRUTH

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

Method

In Part 1 I described Charles S. Peirce's view of the pragmatic method. William James championed Peirce, and elaborated on his ideas in a series of lectures in 1906-7, published in a book titled *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways Of Thinking*, available online here. In Lecture 2, James describes Peirce's insights.

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can BE no difference any-where that doesn't MAKE a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. Emphasis in original.

As an example, consider the notions of appearance and reality. The issue is raised by a question: "How can people know the nature of reality when all that people have immediate access to are appearances?" The idea is like Plato's cave wall. We don't see reality itself, just the shadows cast on the walls of the cave we inhabit.* The linked article offers a number of replies to this dilemma. The pragmatist rejects it. What difference does this distinction make to any human being? What different behavior would a decision cause? Scientists have done wonders without worrying about the distinction. There isn't a test to distinguish appearance from reality. No useful information comes from considering the question.

True, it's fun, and it's interesting to understand the problem it presented to our ancestors. But contemplating this distinction will never produce anything that will make our lives better, or even different.**

The problem with this view is that it suggests some fixed and eternal reality outside human experience but that we can somehow grasp.

Truth

In Lecture VI, James defines truth as a property of our ideas: whether they agree with reality. Both pragmatists and others agree with this. James describes the dominant view of truth as the copy or correspondence theory. Our ideas are true if they copy or correspond with reality. But that raises two questions: what does copy or correspond mean in this sense? What exactly is the reality we are trying to copy?

Here's my example: what does it mean for our ideas to agree with gravity? At one point in our history, it meant nothing. Gravity existed and we defied it at our peril, and there was nothing else to say about it. Was that true? Then Newton explained gravity with an equation that included a constant that was hard to measure. Was that true? Then Einstein showed us his equations of general relativity. Are those equations true? Does that mean Newton's theory was false? That can't be right, because Newton explains everything we need to function in our day to day lives, without the complexity of Einstein's theory. And we still defy gravity at our peril.

James says that people who hold to the external reality view have a static view of truth. They think there is some objective truth out there somehow separate from and beyond our senses. Once they find that truth, they can construct a theory that would account for everything. It might be Marx, it might be some form of religion, it might be some economic theory. But it is static and cannot be affected by the growth of human understanding or anything else. They have the truth, and we must all accept it.

Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: TRUE IDEAS ARE THOSE THAT WE CAN ASSIMILATE, VALIDATE, CORROBORATE AND VERIFY. FALSE IDEAS ARE THOSE THAT WE CANNOT. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as. (Emphasis in original.)

For pragmatists, truth

... means, {Dewey and Schiller} say, nothing but this, THAT IDEAS (WHICH THEMSELVES ARE BUT PARTS OF OUR EXPERIENCE) BECOME TRUE JUST IN SO FAR AS THEY HELP US TO GET INTO SATISFACTORY RELATION WITH OTHER PARTS OF OUR EXPERIENCE, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true INSTRUMENTALLY. This is the 'instrumental' view of truth taught so successfully at Chicago, the view that truth in our ideas means their power to 'work,' promulgated so brilliantly at Oxford.*** Emphasis in original.

Truth is located in the ability of an opinion to work in the real world. In taking this view, James and other pragmatists are following along in the scientific consensus on truth. We take Newton's theory of gravity as true because it works. Einstein's theory of gravity adds more, without taking away the truth of Newton's ideas under most circumstances. We take Darwin's ideas as true because they explain our experiences of the real world. Darwin's ideas enable us to make predictions we could not otherwise make and solve problems we didn't even know existed. As problems arise, we modify our opinions, but only as far as necessary to accommodate the new facts, the new opinions or the failure of our opinions to work. Thus, we follow a very conservative path from our current state to the next state.

The cash value, as James calls it, is obvious. We benefit from having opinions that work. They help us predict the future. They are tools to uncover things and processes we can manipulate to make our lives better. They dispel ideas that might cause us harm.

One more thing. James says that all of our oldest beliefs were formed in the same way, as opinions based on the impressions we get through our senses from reality.

Now Dewey and Schiller proceed to generalize this observation and to apply it to the most ancient parts of truth. ... They also were called true for human reasons. They also mediated between still earlier truths and what in those days were novel observations. Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they ARE true, for 'to be true' MEANS only to perform this marriage-function. Emphasis in

original.

In Part 3 I will offer some thoughts on these ideas.

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* This is the image behind Marcy's occasional references to the Twitter cave wall, an image I really like.

** Roman Catholic theology is grounded in Plato and neo-Platonism, including Plato's distinction between appearance and reality. The application of pragmatism to religion is far beyond the scope of this primer. James takes it up in Lecture VIII, but there is much more to be said. See also this comment by Drew on the previous post.

*** In this quote "they" refers to John Dewey and F.C.S. Schiller, described in the introduction to the book. Chicago refers to the University of Chicago, where Dewey taught. Schiller taught at Oxford.