

Introduction

William James is best remembered for contributing to psychology the famous phrase “stream of consciousness,” and for establishing the doctrine of pragmatism, principally through his instrumentalist theory of truth: “Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural . . . having only this quality in common, that they *pay*. . . . Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc., are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them.”¹ Truth is what brings a return, what “pays”; it is about favorable actions that succeed. A simple reversal of this phrase is enough to make pragmatism look like nothing more than a caricature of the symbols of American-style success: health, wealth, strength are the sole truths.

The work of James is often seen as a philosophy of unfettered capitalism, with ideas that pay, truths that “live on credit,” that is, everything that might commonly be taken for “pragmatism” today, as a sort of capitalist ready-made. Max Horkeimer, for instance, thus denounces pragmatism from Charles S. Peirce to John Dewey: “Their philosophy reflects, with an almost disarming candor, the spirit of the prevailing business culture.”² Great effort has gone into drawing an image of a specifically American philosophy—direct, naïve, mercantile—of which James’s pragmatism would be the liveliest incarnation. Oddly, the idea of a properly American philosophy is more commonly invoked when it comes to James than to his contemporaries, such as Peirce or Josiah Royce. James is presented as the one who gives America its national philosophy, much as James Fenimore Cooper and Walt Whitman are said to provide its literature.

Yet nothing could be further from James than the recent “neo-pragmatist” theses of Rorty, for instance, who proposes to establish specifically American criteria for universal democratic conversation, and to promote the

United States as an indigenous source of fundamental values. Nothing could be less pluralist or less in keeping with James's thought (or with Dewey's), despite Rorty's claims to follow it. James's efforts to clear up such misunderstandings have come to naught: pragmatism remains the philosophy of the American businessman, and the term no longer holds any meaning other than opportunistic action. Yet it was none other than William James who denounced, time and again, the imperialist ambitions of the United States, its generalized mercantilism, and its cult of money and financial success.³

Nor is James's pragmatism a "philosophy of action," in the sense of aiming to establish a theory of action, or describing which of its mechanisms make for greater efficiency, or in the sense of constantly calling on action as an ultimate end. The alleged "let us be practical" does not mean that everything will have to work out, at any cost, regardless of underlying conditions, provided a satisfactory return is had. The pragmatic definition of truth does not come down to validation through action, even if James maintains that the truth of an idea lies partly in its "practical consequences." His interpreters persistently identify the field of practice with the domain of action. Yet, for James, the term "practical" does not necessarily refer to the domain of action as opposed to the field of theoretical reflection; it refers above all to a point of view: "practical" means that reality, thought, knowledge (and also action) are considered in terms of their making. In a general way, James's philosophy is a philosophy of how humans are made in a world that is itself also being made. The reason he objects to rationalists and absolutists (especially the Hegelians, even though they were the first to introduce movement into concepts) comes of how they step in too late, after things have happened, "when a form of life has grown old," and the world has put forth everything it may put forth. As James says, "What really *exists* is not things made but things in the making."⁴ Any reality is to be considered in the moment of its creating. Nonetheless this gesture should not be construed as making for a philosophy of the self-made man (that is, individualism, of which some have accused him), for it is evident that the individual could not be made if she were not at the same time caught up in tremendous flows of the world, traversed by the incessant movement of what is in the making. This problem is one that runs through all of James's philosophy: How can knowledge, truth, and belief be made if the world in which we live is open to perpetual novelty? Thus, for instance, it is not enough to say that an idea is thought

within the mind, or that the mind represents an idea. Such a definition is deprived of movement and, in this respect, is largely incomplete; what must be demonstrated is how the idea is made in the mind, and how the mind is made by it. What must be introduced into its definition is what James calls “practical consequences,” essentially pragmatic criteria. The idea is defined no longer as a representation or modification of the mind but as a process by which mind is made.

Key advances in psychology around the years 1880–90 had already introduced such an approach.⁵ In *Principles of Psychology*, psychological realities are treated as a veritable mishmash of intertwining and interpenetrating flows. Consciousness is not defined as a substantial reality, nor even as a reflexive act; consciousness is the movement of what is being made conscious. Such work shows, in effect, how consciousness never stops marking its limits within thought, how consciousness expands or contracts away from the unconscious bordering it.

James later (around 1904) takes up the same question but considerably enlarges it when he inaugurates “radical empiricism,” introducing the notion of pure experience. Now it is a matter of showing that a plane of thought exists that precedes all the categories of psychology and traditional philosophy, and that those categories, far from being constitutive, must, on the contrary, be constituted on the basis of this plane of thought. Subject and object, matter and thought, are described not as givens or a priori forms but as processes that are being made within thought or alongside it. Freeing the movement of what is in the making on the psychological plane, as on the philosophical plane, invariably implies a critique of the forms in which we usually tend to partition flows of life, thought, and matter.

If empiricism is, strictly speaking, James’s philosophy, what are we to make of pragmatism? Pragmatism is not a philosophy. It is a method, nothing other than a method, of which the general maxim, borrowed from Peirce, is as follows: “There is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.”⁶ It is true that James, from 1907, gives a double definition to pragmatism that allows us to think that it is something other than a simple method: “Such then would be the scope of pragmatism—first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth.”⁷ Yet this theory is an effect of the method itself and is thus inseparable from it. Now we may begin to clarify these two aspects of pragmatism.

In the first instance, pragmatism is a method of practical evaluation. It examines ideas, concepts, and philosophies, not from the point of view

of their internal coherence or their rationality but as a function of their “practical consequences.” We have to evaluate ideas in light of how they propose to make us act or think. It all comes down to the following question: What makes possible the truth of our ideas? Or, how does an idea become true? How is a true idea made? Thus, in the second instance, the pragmatic method is inseparable from a tool of construction (or a genetic theory of what is meant by truth, to use James’s turn of phrase). Pragmatism thus responds to the question of how to produce ideas for acting or thinking. The only thing it can do, as a method of evaluation, is to help us choose, from among philosophies, religions, and social ideas, those that are most beneficial to our action or thought. For example, it is odd that we can equally well characterize the same world in terms of generalized determinism as in terms of sovereign free will, as if this changed nothing. Yet, if we can in theory choose indifferently between determinism and free will, such is not the case in practice. Our action is not the same if we support the one or the other. Pragmatism is not a philosophy but a method for choosing among philosophies. As a tool for construction, however, what it must do is to help us create ideas that may be of use in acting or thinking. As such, it becomes a tool of creation. *How are ideas made, and what do we do with ideas?*—these are two axes of the pragmatic method. In general terms, pragmatism conceives of ideas as spurs for action, which allow us to create and evaluate. This is where things get difficult: it is not a method about creating but a method for creating.

These two inseparable aspects of pragmatism echo two expressions that often overlap in James: reality is made; reality is in the making. There is a sort of moral exigency to becoming: the world is in the making at the same time that it has to be made. This means that action, far from being a solution, has become a problem. Acting and thinking are now problems insofar as they entail risk. “In the total game of life we stake our persons all the while.”⁸ Of course, not all our actions or thoughts entail risk; yet, before turning into settled habits, they initially involved experimentation. This is the moment that interests James. Speaking generally, pragmatism is addressed to someone who, in some area or another, is no longer capable of acting, precisely someone for whom acting constitutes a problem or a risk. You cannot take risks, however, unless you have *faith*.

Such a theme is not original to James. Transcendentalism already invoked it as an essential condition.⁹ It insistently called on faith. The individual must be the pioneer who has faith in himself, in his strength, in

his judgment, just as he has faith in the power of Nature with which he is unified in a feeling of fusion (even if it entails distrust of conformism within society and the city, as with Emerson as well as with Thoreau when he calls for “civil disobedience”). Faith is inseparable from a Romantic union with the Whole. As Emerson says in *Self-Reliance*, the prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed is heard throughout nature.¹⁰ He enters into communion with the all-encompassing unity of the Over-Soul. There is thus no faith in self without faith in human beings, in all humanity, in nature, and in God. Such a great circular trinity, Divinity-Nature-Humanity, is also found in another great transcendentalist, William James’s father Henry James Sr.¹¹

There is no doubt that, in some respects, pragmatism is a prolongation of transcendentalism. Like transcendentalism, pragmatism calls for individual action, for risk, and for faith. A fundamental break nonetheless occurs: it is no longer possible to maintain the great fusional harmony between Humans, Nature, and God. To give but one example, as James remarks, when you consider the development of sciences, in the plural, and the disorder and indetermination they introduce into the structure of our universe, the existence of a single God whose archetypes we copy becomes difficult to believe in. Pluralism breaks fusional unity much as Darwinism broke harmonic finality. The previous sort of naïveté and confident optimism is no longer possible for us moderns. James makes a similar observation, but on another plane, when in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he describes numerous cases in which belief collapses, in which an individual is no longer capable of belief, not only in God or in ideals, but also in himself and in the very world that lies before him. When we go through such crises, the world suddenly loses all meaning. The diverse connections that bind us to the world break, one after the other. In sum, we can no longer believe as we did before; action becomes impossible because we have lost faith.

Pragmatism is born of such observations. It is not the triumphant echo of America but, on the contrary, the symptom of a profound break that ruptures the wholeness of action. It does not follow the movement of what is in the making without struggling against the movement of what is being unmade. It is in this sense that action is a problem for James, and not in the least a universal solution. James’s diagnostic is akin to that of Nietzsche: we no longer believe in anything. Nietzsche diagnoses it through the symptom of nihilism, primarily in the “nothingness of will” of active nihilism. James diagnoses it in the profound loss of faith that translates into a profound crisis of action. The one who no longer believes,

the one who no longer has faith, remains immobile and without reaction, *undone*. She is as if stricken with a death of the senses.¹² Of course, we continue to act as we always do, and undoubtedly even with a considerable “return,” but do we still believe in our actions? With what intensity? Do we still believe in the world that makes us act? How can we feel faith in others, have faith in ourselves, and even have faith in the world? Which philosophy, which doctrine, will restore our faith? Such questions are so many subsets of the central problem.

The task of philosophy is thus not to seek the true or the rational, but to give us reasons to believe in this world just as the religious person is disposed to find reasons to believe in another world. The pragmatic method is inseparable from this general problem. When James asks, “What is a true idea?” he really means, “What are the signs in which one can have faith?” For, ultimately, it is never signs in general in which we do or don’t place our faith—but specific signs, which the pragmatic method allows us to find. For instance, others express themselves through signs, and yet we must have signs other than those they explicitly manifest if we are to know whether we can believe in what they say. The signs by which I understand what someone says are not the same as those by which I believe in what someone says. Likewise when we say that we no longer believe in this world: this really means that we cease to believe in certain signs that constitute its existence for us. In other words, pragmatism requires a new theory of signs.

Pragmatism is not a philosophy, but it demands with its every fiber a philosophy that permits us to act once again, not a philosophy in which we can believe, but rather a philosophy that makes us believe. There is no lack of ideas in which to believe and on which to act—God, Self, Revolution, Progress—but something is broken in our power to believe. And it remains broken unless the pragmatic method of evaluation makes clear to us that pluralism, more than any other philosophy, provides us with motives for action. The question then becomes: What is it exactly about pluralism that makes us act? And correlatively, what is about other philosophies that they do not produce such an effect?

The paradox is that James sees in pluralism the form most capable of restoring such belief, while other thinkers, on the contrary, see in it pure and simple relativism, the form that generates all our skepticisms. Is it not the plurality of spaces in geometry that makes us doubt the truth of axioms, and the plurality of philosophies that makes us doubt the truth of each doctrine, and so forth? Why the form of pluralism? Someone

who affirms the existence of a single truth, of a single science, of a single dogma, whom James calls the “absolutist,” he too believes. He believes more fervently than the pluralist. Why then claim that pluralism is the most capable of making us believe when, on the contrary, it gives us more reasons for doubt than does absolutism? It is imperative to try to resolve this question: How does the pluralism of radical empiricism foster faith (when it is presumed to engender doubt and suspicion)? Put another way, how do we make pluralism in general an object of faith?

We should not, for all that, presume that James’s philosophy was for him a means of “getting out” of psychology. Pragmatism also needs a psychology. James’s thought is always defined as pluralism, and this pluralism as perspectivism. To each consciousness, taken in itself, the question is posed of how to believe and act. In this sense, the pragmatic method may be defined with good reason as “democratic.”¹³ It cannot dictate a universal rule. Such a stance makes clear why pragmatism needs a psychology, since it examines the effect produced by ideas on a consciousness. Yet this way of putting it is still too general. It does not address what is specifically of concern: Why is it that the problem of faith requires a psychology of consciousness conceived in terms of flow?

By definition, flow never ceases to vary, to pass through dips and rises, and the field of consciousness corresponding to these variations never stops expanding and contracting. Thus a consciousness believes and acts when the variations that traverse it cross a certain threshold—whence a psychology that studies variations of the field of consciousness, a psychology of intensity. Now, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James shows that a field of consciousness enlarges and expands its connections as a function of the extent of its faith. This means that variations in intensity of consciousness are nothing other than variations in the feeling of faith. It is a psychology of faith or, if one prefers, for the problem of faith. In this way, far from being independent of pragmatism, such a psychology is the only one possible for the general problem that James poses, for which he must find a solution: What does a consciousness need for signs to have a meaning? Or in other words: What is needed for signs to spur consciousness to action? Which is, in still other words, the same as asking: What is needed for signs to lead a consciousness to produce other signs, actions, or thoughts in connection with the first ones? In this summary form, three distinct axes emerge: pragmatism, whose problem consists of determining which signs or ideas lead to our being able to act or to augment our power

to act; radical empiricism, whose problem consists of determining how signs are constituted and the rules according to which they are organized; and to a lesser extent, psychology, whose problem consists of determining what allows consciousness to give meaning to the signs it perceives and how consciousness responds to them through variations in its flow. These are the three problems that we must attempt to resolve.