Introduction: Pragmatism, Dewey, and Design Inquiry

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The philosophical movement now known as classical pragmatism emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. Although it formed in tandem with the country's rapid industrialization and post-Civil War social reorganization, its founders also referenced values and insights that extended far beyond North America.[1] These references included Charles Darwin's work on evolutionary theory and the resulting shift in social and moral understanding that followed.[2] Equally, through the rise of global trade and expanding communication channels, exchange was taking place across continents[3]—and this exchange, in turn, led to a greater general awareness of cultural and social distinction.[4] Drawing on these currents, pragmatism pitched a philosophy of immediacy, foregrounding a concern for real-world consequences over theoretical abstraction.[5] As this special issue illustrates, it is in this concern for real-world consequences that we may surface key insights for design.[6]

To understand pragmatism, we need to turn to its founders. Four names traditionally are considered central here: Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, as first-generation pragmatists, and John Dewey and George Herbert Mead as second-generation pragmatists. Peirce, the movement's nominal founder, focused on logic and semiotics and was deeply concerned with foregrounding the consequences of thought; James, for his part, established a pioneering psychology of experience; Dewey, the key figure foregrounded in this special issue, would later progress a vision for democratic emancipation via domains such as education; and Mead was concerned with the social aspect of experience focusing on the areas of communication and mind.[7] Alongside these figures, attention is increasingly turning to a group referred to as the feminist pragmatists. While scholarship is still surfacing a wealth of previously underrepresented voices here, key individuals include Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett whom each explored a host of social and organizational themes via real-world intervention.[8]

Importantly, returning to the increased global awareness of the time, pragmatism was not limited to an exclusively North American context. Paths led outward to individuals in other

1 Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: The Story of Ideas in America* (London: Harper Collins, 2002).

2 Philp P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949).

3 Such trade and communication developments involved and to an extent relied on entrenched colonialism and exploitation.

4 Pragmatism also can be aligned with the traditions of East Asia. See, e.g., Kenneth K. Inada and Nolan P Jacobson, eds., *Buddhism and the American Thinkers* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984).

5 Philp P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949).

6 For a wider discussion of this connection, see Brian Dixon, *Design, Philosophy and Making Things Happen* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

7 Many accounts are available of these individuals' pragmatist positions. For a useful overview, see Horace S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968).

8 See Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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countries. In Europe, we might highlight additional important (although currently under-considered) pragmatist voices in Ferdinand C. S. Schiller (England), Georges Sorel (France), and Giovanni Panini (Italy), along with many others.[9] We also note a strong Asian dimension to pragmatism, which only now is being properly studied. Significantly in this regard, Dewey visited China and Japan for more than two years, between 1919 and 1921. His stay in China was particularly prolonged. In 1920–1921, he traveled widely, visiting schools and civic institutions across the provinces, lecturing on education and social issues while also becoming immersed in the local and national culture. This experience inevitably affected his work and equally established a pragmatist legacy in Asia that continues today.[10]

Insofar as any design-oriented principles can be derived from these classical pragmatist references, we can isolate two key thematic threads. In the first instance, via Peirce, Dewey, and James, pragmatism can be seen to offer novel ways of looking at questions of logic, truth, and experience that depart from previous norms. Historically, both logic and truth were seen as absolute ideals standing apart from our experience of daily life; pragmatism took the opposite view—seeing the two as structures that emerged from within life itself. On this account, logical theory is a reflective by-product of successful action—that is, an abstract formalization of the process of inquiry—and truth is a modeling of what "works," or what is evidential—that is, a model of how best to achieve specific goals or explain a certain process. From this perspective, the concept of "experience" comes to refer to more than mere subjectivity; it denotes instead our full participation in the world as we act and come to understand, both individually and socially.[11]

In relation to the second key thematic, we also note that, via Dewey, Addams, Parker Follett, and others, pragmatism promotes the idea of actively engaging with social and political concerns, working to explore solutions to problems in direct terms. Here, the point is no longer simply to comment on society's ills but to respond and act. The result was a participatory approach to philosophizing—one that is as much about doing something as about saying something.[12]

This bold offer has not gone unnoticed in design. Classical pragmatism's relationship with the discipline is now long-standing, with numerous alignments having been drawn over the past century. Here, pragmatism has informed the development of design curricula[13]; design research agendas[14]; and key design theories.[15] This influence has been especially pronounced after the inaugural Doctoral Education in Design Conference, held in Ohio in 1998, and the subsequent growth in global design research degree provision

9 For recent historical articulations on this wider reach, see Scott Ainkin and Robert B. Talisse, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

10 Jessica Ching-Sze Wang provides a helpful history of this trip and its influence, arguing that Dewey approached China on its own terms. See Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach to Learn* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007). In addition, Dewey gained several Chinese followers and students who sought to reapply his methods. A key example is Hu Shih, who sought to establish pragmatist principles in Chinese education in the 1920s. See Sor-Hoon Tan, "China's Pragmatist Experiment in Democracy: Hu Shih's Pragmatism and Dewey's Influence in China," *Metaphilosophy* 35, no. 1–2 (2004): 44–64. Equally, present-day Asian design scholars have embraced his ideas. For example, Xin Xiangyang, a Carnegie Mellon graduate, focuses on the experience economy in China. See Wa An et al., "Lifestyle as the Object of Design: Elements Exploration from Experience Perspective," in *Design, User Experience, and Usability. Interaction Design. HCII 2020, Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol. 12200, ed. Aaron Marcus and Elizabeth Rosenzweig (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 311–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49713-2_22. As another example, Miso Kim is a Dewey scholar in South Korea. See, e.g., Miso Kim, "Designing for Participation: Dignity and Autonomy of Service (Part 2)," *Design Issues* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 89–102.

11 Ralph Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism: John Dewey's Conception of Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

12 See, e.g., Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*.

13 For example, it has been claimed that Dewey's work partially informed the development of Tomás Maldonado's influential semiotics at the Ulm School in Germany in the 1950s. See Klaus Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2006), 306.

that followed it.[16] Since then, pragmatism's design-oriented principles gradually have consolidated as a foothold in the overarching structures of the field, as academics have, by necessity, sought to consolidate pragmatism as a theoretical base.[17]

In terms of the specific effects, we note that pragmatism's approach to logic and truth has gained a definite ascendency in recent methodological discourse. Here, pragmatist perspectives now furnish a core within the process-based literature; Peirce's abduction and Dewey's theory of inquiry are fully integrated as essential concepts in numerous articulations of design thinking and practice in research.[18] In addition, pragmatist work on rhetoric has found a place as a means of understanding systems design.[19] From connections established in the 1970s, Dewey's theories of experience have become firmly established as a core theoretical reference point in the context of human–computer interaction.[20] The connections afford a number of important frameworks by which everyday situations may be centered in the design process.[21] This current place in the discourse builds on a legacy of direct input into design's development, where Dewey helped to establish Chicago's New Bauhaus in the 1930s and supported the development of Black Mountain College's early curriculum.[22]

In terms of pragmatism's activist approach, this work is now firmly embedded in articulations of design's social and political agenda—a horizon that is fundamental to the discipline's present and future. In particular, John Dewey's democratic vision has been enfolded within participatory design discourse, with his "publics" concept (i.e., the idea that groups can cohere around mutually-held matters of concern) acting as a touchstone in discussions of civic engagement and citizen involvement in design.[23] In addition, in line with the general rise of feminist pragmatism, as previously noted, we see growing efforts to draw productive alignments between the work of Jane Addams and others and the domain of social design.[24]

Taken as a whole, this special issue aims to celebrate some of these highly significant contributions and to trace trajectories that move beyond them. In other words, we not only look back to what has been but also look forward to what could be. Dewey, particularly, is foregrounded—partly because of his existing prominence in design discourse. However, he also provides a way into discussing other key pragmatist figures; we see from the articles that his work was forged in and through outward links to Mead, Addams, and many others. Further, and importantly, his perspective is highly attuned to the needs of our times and to design's potential role in them. He commonly sought to blend practice, theory, and production together as one—for example, in the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, where the development of new pedagogies

14 Brian Dixon "Experiments in Experience: Towards an Alignment of Research through Design and John Dewey's Pragmatism," *Design Issues* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 5–16.

15 Perhaps the most prominent of these theories is Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

16 See Richard Buchanan et al., eds. *Doctoral Education in Design 1998: Proceedings of the Ohio Conference, October 8–11, 1998* (Pittsburgh, PA: The School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University, 1999); and Victor Margolin, "Doctoral Education in Design: Problems and Prospects," *Design Issues* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 70.

17 This consolidation has been especially apparent in the UK and Australia, which have government-funded and -evaluated higher education structures. See Cameron Tonkinwise, "Post-Normal Design Research: The Role of Practice-Based Research in the Era of Neoliberal Risk," in *Practice-Based Design Research*, ed. Laurene Vaughen (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017): 29–39.

18 In design thinking, see, e.g., Kees Dorst, "The Core of 'Design Thinking' and Its Application," *Design Studies* 32, no. 6 (2011): 521–32; Peter Dalsgaard, "Pragmatism and Design Thinking," *International Journal of Design* 8, no. 1 (2014); and Anna Rylander Eklund, Ulises Navarro Aguiar, and Ariana Amacker, "Design Thinking as Sensemaking: Developing a Pragmatist Theory of Practice to (Re)Introduce Sensibility," *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 39, no. 1 (2022): 24–43. In design research, see, e.g., Brian Dixon, *Dewey and Design: A Pragmatist Perspective for Design Research* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020). Findings and claims about pragmatism and design research often demonstrate possibilities as opposed to any absolute, generalizable insights.

19 Richard Buchanan, "Systems Thinking and Design Thinking: The Search for Principles in the World We Are Making," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 5, no. 2 (2019): 85–104.

20 Richard Buchanan, "Thinking About Design: An Historical Perspective," in *Philosophy of Technology and Engineering Sciences*, vol. 9, ed. Anthonie Meijers (Amsterdam, NH:

evolved in an ongoing, iterative delivery.[25] This approach distinguishes his thinking from that of Herbert Simon, whose Design Science sought definite solutions to definite problems prior to practice.[26] Dewey also exhibits a full-blown, twenty-first-century orientation, with his thinking routinely crossing disciplinary boundaries and carrying inquiries simultaneously over multiple domains.[27] As a consequence, his work currently fully registers with emerging findings in relation to the embodied mind in cognitive science and with all-persuasive understandings of ecology and human perspectives in relation to technology.[28] As Richard Rorty put it, he is "waiting at the road."[29] Exploring these lines of inquiry, this Special Issue's articles proceed as follows.

The article by Anna Rylander Eklund, Brian Dixon, and Frithjof Wegener returns to Donald Schön's pragmatist-informed work on reflective practice. Their focus is directed toward Schön's structuring of reflection-in-action and its relationship to design. Seeking to further enrich the pragmatist positioning of these proposals, they turn to the work of Dewey, looking at his ideas regarding "pre-reflective" (i.e., non-representational) thought and "habits," wherein action and thought are directly related. What emerges is a novel means of presenting design in relation to pre-reflection and habitual ways of acting. The authors are not disavowing Schön's work but are seeking to open a path by which it might be enriched.

Next, Danielle Lake and Judy Whipps draw a series of relationships between feminist pragmatists and social design inquiry. After offering an initial introduction to feminist pragmatism, the authors focus in on two cases drawn from the work of Julia Lathrop and Grace Abbott, looking specifically at Lathrop's involvement in the development of juvenile courts and Abbott's involvement in the development of the Immigrant Protection League. They conclude by highlighting three strategies of focus that feminist pragmatism can afford design: on the situated and relational; on experimental prototyping; and on flexible engagement. This article significantly extends an understanding of the particularity of feminist pragmatism and, in doing so, further clarifies the value of the perspective for design.

In a related vein, Josina Vink considers the potential relationship between the emerging area of systematic design and pragmatism. Focusing initially on contemporary models of systems design, Vink problematizes the tendency to foreground *concepts* of design knowledge, skills, and methods, contrasting it with the potential of a pragmatist perspective, which is seen to allow for an embodied and mundane understanding of practice. Here, systems design is repositioned as a process of working to directly shape social structures and communities. Vink's contribution is especially

Elsevier, 2009): 409–53. Buchanan describes how Dewey's ideas inspired Palo Alto researchers.

21 We encounter some of these affordances in the articles of this special issue. For a useful reference, see John McCarthy and Peter Wright, *Technology as Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).

22 See Alain Findeli, "Moholy-Nagy's Design Pedagogy in Chicago (1937–46)," *Design Issues* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 4–19. Findeli notes in particular that "Art as Experience" was a required text with the Product Design studio through the late-1930s. See also Katherine Reynolds, "The Influence of John Dewey on Experimental Colleges: The Black Mountain Example" (paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Conference, San Francisco, CA, April 22, 1995).

23 See, e.g., Christopher L. Le Dantec, *Designing Publics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

24 See, e.g., Danielle Lake, "Emergent, Relational Revolution: What More Do We Have to Learn from Jane Addams?" *Hypatia* 36, no. 2 (2021): 410–24.

25 See Laurel L. Tanner, Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1997).

26 Herbert Simon, *The Science of the Artificial* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969).

27 At the turn of the twentieth century, Dewey was conducting inquiries in philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy at the same time. For helpful accounts of the activity undertaken during this period, see Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

28 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and Larry Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Modernism: Lessons from John Dewey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

29 For Rorty, this observation related to analytic philosophy in particular, but it carries to the wider question of transdisciplinarity proposed here. Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xviii.

timely, given the increasingly urgent calls for design to approach complex problems holistically; as they demonstrate, pragmatism can and should support such efforts.

Following Vink, Ilpo Koskinen, Jodi Forlizzi, and Katja Battarbee reflect on the historical emergence of two key strands of pragmatist influence in design: the use of Dewey's account of experience and of Mead and Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism. The authors offer a valuable consideration of the influence of these ideas in the field and conclude by exploring what the perspectives offer as we move into the next phase of technological development, where artificial intelligence (AI) poses new questions for design. As such, this contribution offers not only a historical grounding but also a prospective positioning.

John McCarthy and Peter Wright advance the themes of the special issue by amplifying two key voices who have guided their work on "experience-centered design" over the past number of decades: John Dewey and Mikhail Bakhtin. Like Koskinen, Forlizzi, and Battarbee, McCarthy and Wright offer both a reflection and a vision for our technological future, focusing on how experience-centered design can respond to the challenges of post-truth culture, radical equality, and the ambiguities of subjectivity. Their article amounts to a renewed experience-centered agenda for the field, tracing a secure path by which pragmatism can continue to support designers' efforts to work within the special context of lived experience.

In the final article, Brian Dixon reimagines the relationship between philosophy and design. In doing so, he links to Dewey's proposals regarding the need to pursue a "reconstruction" in philosophy and traces out a vision for a "philosophy-through-design"—an approach that would rely on a form of experimentalism similar to research-through-design but that would be distinguishable on the basis that its outcomes would allow for the progressive shaping of a values-based philosophy. This article by no means constitutes a final vision but moves to advance the horizons of design philosophy.

Insofar as forward trajectories can be traced from here, we note three key lines of investigation that can be identified from these contributions. These trajectories relate to the potential for pragmatism to support efforts to meet the challenge of new, emerging technologies, such as AI; the drawing of deeper links between philosophy and design via pragmatism; and further integration of feminist pragmatist and Deweyan perspectives, alongside the horizons of systems design and social design. These moves lead on from design's pragmatist past and present, pointing to the possibility of extending what has been achieved. In this regard, we see that there is still much to explore and define.

Were it to be pursued, such work would not mark a limit for the potential of pragmatism in design. Further opportunities lie beyond what is foregrounded here, based on three key strategies. First, as the feminist pragmatists demonstrate, there are a wealth of lesser-known figures who, in their adherence to pragmatism, may yet offer design valuable insights into questions of democracy, society, and logic. Working to surface these voices ensures that no otherwise meaningful reference points are unnecessarily obscured or overlooked.[30]

Second, a significant project of bridging remains to be done —finding points where pragmatism connects to existing work. That Donald Schön drew on pragmatism is well known, but the same is true of others. For example, Richard McKeon's theories of rhetoric and thought have threaded through Richard Buchanan's work for more than 40 years. McKeon was a student of Dewey and in some ways carried on his legacy.[31] Viewed in this light, twenty-first-century design discourse is already significantly, as opposed to partly, pragmatist.[32]

Third, approaching pragmatism thematically presents an equally promising opportunity as a means to draw out ways of thinking that can speak to challenges and concerns in design today. A definite area for development here is sustainability. Although pragmatism does not (and cannot) offer formal sustainability frameworks, it can support efforts to rework our ontological understanding—that is, our understanding of how we, as humans, fit into the world—such that we may be equipped to better "see" in ecological terms.[33] In addition, and as several of the articles here have alluded, the opportunity arises to consider how the pluriversal—that is, the celebration of social and cultural distinctiveness—can be positively enfolded in design through a foregrounding of pragmatist approaches to communication and democracy.

On a final note, we acknowledge that design has, perhaps wisely, been historically resistant to enforcing any absolute philosophic alignments. However, pragmatism can accommodate this openness. It does not demand absolute alignment, but only a willingness to engage. The philosophies of Dewey, Mead, Addams, Peirce, James, and many others are there to be referenced as and when required. In this way, pragmatism can act as an "enabling" philosophy—a philosophy that can evolve and advance the field from within, supporting efforts to *make* futures that also *remake* the present.

30 Of the names already mentioned, perhaps Addams and Parker Follett deserve more concentrated focus. Nonetheless, James and Mead remain under-considered in contemporary design discourse. Beyond these four, other, currently more peripheral, names may be worth exploring. For example, Sydney Hook was a one-time student of Dewey and is a compelling candidate for examination. His work can be seen to progress classical pragmatism through the middle- to late-twentieth century.

31 Buchanan was a student of McKeon's and so carries forth from a direct line to Dewey.

32 Eugene Garver and Richard Buchanan, eds., *Pluralism in Theory and Practice: Richard McKeon and American Philosophy* (Nashville TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

33 One of the many potential starting points for such work would be found in the ontological position of Dewey in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 1: 1925, Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981).