PRAGMATISM

Pragmatism is a method of inquiry that deems an object or belief adequately “true” if it has utility for an individual or a collective. It is an American philosophical tradition that reflects certain values typically identified as American, such as the principles of individual choice, optimistic progress, and practicality. It promotes scientific skepticism, beginning with the notion that there is no solid metaphysical foundation, real object, or system of thought independent of observational influence. For pragmatists, judging whether a theory or concept should be valued was usually determined by the answer to William James’s question, “What difference would it make if one believed it?” In other words, the system of thought was judged according to its consequences, that is, in terms of what it would allow an individual (or humanity) to achieve. In this sense, pursuit of the absolute truth of a concept were folly and interminable. These quests were doomed to failure and should be discarded in favor of the pursuit of what works—or what achieves empirically verifiable ends and goals. Thus, the method may be thought of as a kind of settling for the best alternative, given that human beings can never achieve knowledge of the object in-itself, independent of individual perception.

Charles Sanders Peirce was the progenitor of pragmatism and perhaps one of the most influential American philosophers, despite his relatively small number of publications. His aim was to produce a theory of meaning that would reduce facts to measurable sensations, and he felt that pragmatism was primarily a scientific system of inquiry. Pierce claimed that natural explorations were a series of mediations between the “real,” or an external agent that acts upon us and forces a response, and the “true,” or our explanation of that phenomenon. While expanding Pierce’s work, William James principally aimed to provide an elaboration upon pragmatic moral and religious questions, and John Dewey sought to apply pragmatist thought to educational and political questions. Together, Peirce, James and Dewey make up the “big three” philosophers in pragmatist thought. James made up for Peirce’s lack of publications by writing amply on the topic. His vision of pragmatism, however, contained important alterations. Most fundamentally, James thought of pragmatic inquiry as subjective, in that an individual’s sense of what worked for that individual was adequate, while Peirce thought ideal inquiry led to objective conclusions reached by collectives. James would apply this subjective pragmatism to his work in founding the field of psychology. John Dewey claimed that institutional communities could benefit from persistent pragmatic insight into their own processes. He argued that institutions should use previous experience and historical analyses to rework institutional norms so that they might yield more beneficial results for the larger society. Moreover, Dewey believed that everyday people, as byproducts of their quests for livelihoods, more or less already held the implicit values of pragmatism.

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