

Pragmatism

by Herb Windolf

“What’s Pragmatism? Does it work on my smart-phone? What will it do for me?” you may ask.

Well, as a first step: If you engage an app, a search engine on your smart-phone, entering “pragmatism,” you will get a definition. Old-fashioned as I am, I googled it and here’s the shortest one I found:

“A practical, matter-of-fact way of approaching or assessing situations or of solving problems.”

You may now think: What the heck? Of course that’s how things get done! But this assumes we are rational beings, which we are not! Our prime motivator is emotion, with beliefs founded on emotion! And beliefs need not be of a religious nature. Oh no, we find plenty of “belief” in the scientific endeavor. A scientist may hold dear a theory he has worked on for ages and has great difficulty letting go of, even when facts argue against it.

Whenever we face a problem, what is necessary to tackle it is the engagement of “ratio,” reason. But to put aside our emotional engagement on the subject in order to concentrate on how to solve the problem and to engage Pragmatism, is no easy task!

Permit me now a brief introduction to the originators of Pragmatism.

Since Classical Greek and Roman times, there have been prominent philosophers, such as the Greeks: Epicurus, Democritus, and Plato; the Romans: Pliny, Plutarch, and Cicero; the Germans: Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche; and the French: Descartes and Sartre. While each of these men, together with their many other ‘seekers,’ contributed to the human font of knowledge, the most notable American philosophy (philosophy meaning ‘Love of Wisdom’), typifying the American mind, is Pragmatism – meaning to have a penchant for the practical.

The originators of Pragmatism in the second half of the 19th century were Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey.

To quote Raymond Pfeiffer on the subject in *Philosophy Now*:

“Pragmatism was originally the thesis that the meaning of an idea can be found by attention to its practical consequences. Such an idea is no mere penchant for the practical: Rather, it is a direct and specific theory of meaning with implications beyond the laboratory and the library.”

And further:

“Pragmatism was one way he (Peirce) applied logic and the methodology of science to philosophy. His theory of knowledge was *fallibilist*, breaking with much of the philosophical tradition and maintaining that some beliefs are true, some not, but that no knowledge is infallible, and that there is no certainty.”

Pfeiffer quotes William James as saying:

“(He) maintained that the practical needs of humans in this world might justify beliefs and practices that cannot otherwise be proven true. The faith of our fathers and mothers might be reasonable not because it is true, but because it is practical.”

Dewey is said to have “viewed the old philosophical search for real, final truths as a threat rather than a virtue. It is the search for knowledge that emerges from the junk

heap of human thought and misguided prophets. Whatever promotes thinking, dialogue and rational inquiry should be encouraged, and whatever stifles it avoided.”

To list some of the best characteristics of American Pragmatism as stated by Pfeiffer:

a. “The extent to which an idea fulfills important human goals, clarifies the idea and also provides evidence for and against the likelihood of its truth.

b. Sharp, fixed distinctions of thought and reality are not reflected in nature, where one thing fades off into the next, one flows into the other and the complexity of our thought is clarified only by theories that give tentative illumination to reality.”

And, last not least, c. “Whatever promotes reasoned dialogue, inquiry and further understanding is good, and what stifles it is bad.”

Are we now getting closer to an answer to the third question asked initially: What will Pragmatism do for me?

Sadly, as we observe the political goings-on on the national level, we can say that American Pragmatism has gone by the wayside! On a personal level: What is bullying in schools to accomplish, based on irrationality and emotions. Does it solve any problem? Does it promote well-being?

Allow me to close on a personal note. On a cursory level I became acquainted with Pragmatism decades ago when I still lived in Germany. While I did not know anything of its originators and its deeper meanings, the practical applications, and their American origin held a profound attraction for me, and in a small way contributed to my settling in the United States of America.

So, some time ago, I wrote a poem in which I expressed my sentiment on the subject, calling it:

Pragmatism

Once, many, many years ago

I came across this magic word,
so plain and yet so real.

It stayed with me throughout my life,
had import and appeal.

And without delving into it,
it was my guiding light

to find solutions, how to deal,
with all of life’s contingencies.

Be practical, find out what works,
and if it doesn’t, change your tack.

Thus did I work, not all was swell,
but in the end, lo and behold,

much that I did worked out quite well.

And, not to forget, Pragmatism implies the application of tolerance, for without tolerance we will be unable to find solutions to the problems we are facing.

Nelson Mandela, while coming close to being a saint, was first and foremost a supreme pragmatist.

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