Pragmatisms (Plural)

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DRAFT (2/11/02): Please do not quote without permission
Pragmatism is used in various, vague, confusing and contradictory ways. It will help clear some of the muddle to distinguish among the generic uses of pragmatism (including (1) dictionary pragmatism, (2) vulgar pragmatism and (3) generic -- or phantom -- philosophical pragmatism), Classical Pragmatism (distinguishing between (4) Deweyan/Peircean pragmatism and (5) Jamesian pragmatism) and Post-Classical Pragmatism (distinguishing between (6) pragmatism in late positivism/linguistic philosophy (7) Rortyan or Postmodernist Pragmatism).

Generic pragmatisms are characterized by their lack of connection to the philosophical literature of pragmatism. Classical Pragmatism is hardly monolithic, though the three great figures shared a radically novel view of what philosophy should be and what it could do. The differences among Peirce, James and Dewey and the coining of a new idiom (especially by Peirce and Dewey) and James’s pluralism lend themselves to varying interpretations of “pragmatism,” some that are completely at odds with the viewpoint of Classical Pragmatism.

Post-Classical Pragmatism includes philosophical views chronologically after the classical pragmatists and having some intellectual roots in the classical versions of pragmatism but which are seriously deficient because the insights and advantages of Classical Pragmatism are not are fully encompassed in the more recent pragmatisms. In part these inadequacies of more recent versions of philosophy result because the more recent converts to pragmatism began their careers and training with analytic philosophy and turned to pragmatism to try to get out of the intellectual corners that orthodox philosophy had painted itself into.
But these more recent versions of “pragmatism” retain incongruous elements of analytic (and effectively positivistic) approaches to philosophy that are antithetical to Classical Pragmatism, especially as exemplified by Dewey’s mature views and by Peirce. In particular, Pragmatism, as the term is used by Richard Rorty, discards from the classical pragmatists those views which are unique and most insightful.

**Generic Pragmatisms.** (1) Dictionary pragmatism is more or less synonymous with an outlook or approach that is practical, useful, or realistic in a homey sense. Pragmatism is contrasted with an abstract, theoretical, idealistic or impractical outlook. In this dictionary version, a pragmatic approach is seen as concerned primarily with results and mundane utilitarian matters and not concerned with explanation, abstraction and distant ethereal values.

(2) Vulgar pragmatism, or pragmatism as the term is used by journalists, means shallow, unprincipled expediency, lack of moral or ideological consistency. When Stalin undercut the international socialist movement and made clandestine deals with capitalists or when politicians sell out the constituencies that elected them this would be said to be evidence of pragmatism as the term is used in the news media. Vulgar pragmatism is contrasted with ideological dogmatism. In journalism calling someone a pragmatist is generally code for meaning he or she is a real SOB.

(3) Generic (or phantom) philosophical pragmatism describes the terms pragmatism or pragmatic as used by professional philosophers who do not seem to have any appreciation or understanding of classical pragmatism or show any evidence of having actually read classical pragmatism. It is generic since “pragmatism” is not attributed to any specific individual or writing and it is phantom since it is something that could not have come from the careful reading and
nuanced critique of the classical versions of philosophical pragmatism. Such discourse is philosophical only in the sense that it takes place among some professional philosophers (and those who read those professional philosophers); such discourse is more accurately described as pretentious gossip.

In philosophy of science, generic philosophical pragmatism is conflated with or reduced to little more than methodological instrumentalism, that is, the doctrine that entities described in scientific theories have no ontological status but are merely convenient instruments of prediction. Sometimes generic philosophical pragmatism ascribes practical usefulness or “control” as a basic aim in a pragmatic philosophy of science. Peirce and Dewey explicitly reject practical usefulness as an evaluation criterion for scientific theories.

In ethics, generic philosophical pragmatism is reduced to the proposition that “anything that works” (in some expedient, shallow sense) is morally justified. In phantom philosophical pragmatism’s absurd caricature of pragmatic ethical theory, this amoral opportunism is unconnected with either critical reasoning or social consequences. A casual acquaintance with Dewey’s work on ethics would demonstrate the fallacy of this position. In the analysis of pragmatic views of ethics, generic philosophical pragmatism differs very little from the vulgar pragmatism as defined in journalism.

A characteristic of generic philosophical pragmatism is that cavalier assertions are made without any reference to any specific pragmatist or any work in pragmatism. Examples of this include Alexander Rosenberg’s Economics: Mathematical Politics or Science of Diminishing Returns, p.18 or to various references to pragmatism in Tony Lawson’s Economics and Reality. Bertrand Russell may be the father of generic philosophical
pragmatism. Although he knew John Dewey personally and had some familiarity with his work, Russell steadfastly refused to respond to Dewey’s reasoned explications and defenses of Deweyan pragmatism. Rather Russell repeated gross caricatures which equated pragmatic inquiry with military parade drill and raised the specter of pragmatism as facilitating totalitarian ideologies.

**Classical Pragmatism**. Charles S. Peirce coined pragmatism as the name for his new philosophy and first stated the pragmatic maxim in which the meaning of a proposition is given by the totality of the consequences that follow from belief in that proposition. The pragmatic maxim as used by Peirce was intended primarily to clarify meaning in scientific work. William James was an early founder and colleague of Peirce. John Dewey, younger than Peirce and James, is the third great figure in Classical Pragmatism. All three share many elements in common.

Classical Pragmatism was (and is) a radical departure from all earlier philosophical traditions of philosophy. All the classical pragmatists were strongly influenced by the Darwinian revolution and evolution as an exemplar of knowledge. Much -- if not all -- of earlier philosophy is premised on the possibility of finding something immutable, transcendental, universal that would provide a certain foundation for knowledge. The problem with this search (the theme of Dewey’s *Quest for Certainty*) is that putative foundations tend to be exposed as based on arbitrary dogmas and, consequently give way to skepticism and relativism. The quest for a certain foundation of knowledge ironically leads to competing irreconcilable dogmas.

Peirce turns Descartes upside down and inside out. Instead of knowledge being necessarily grounded in certainty, all knowledge -- including scientific knowledge -- is seen as
fallible. In Peirce’s analogy, a body of scientific knowledge is likened to a cable whose overall strength is not dependent upon any one fragile thread in contrast to Descartes’s deductive chain which must be anchored to a certain foundation and falls apart if any one link fails.

Dewey’s mature thought incorporates much of Peirce’s view of science but extends the pragmatic maxim beyond Peirce’s use of it (in clarifying scientific meaning) to a generalized analysis of inquiry in scientific, ethical and esthetic realms. The developed version of Dewey’s version of pragmatism could be seen as a comprehensive application of reflective inquiry taking Peirce’s scientific pragmatism as its exemplar.

James’s pragmatism has features that made both Peirce and Dewey want to distance themselves from it. Peirce invented “Pragmaticism” for this purpose and Dewey generally uses “Instrumentalism” or “Experimentalism” instead of James’s umbrella term “Pragmatism.” James’s article “What Pragmatism Means” and Dewey’s critique of it in “What Pragmatism Means by Practical” shows important distinctions exist among classical pragmatists.

(4) Jamesian pragmatism emphasizes a pluralistic perspective and is concerned with the reconciliation of religion with pragmatism. Though trained as a scientist, William James was personally afflicted with debilitating depression. Consequently he was probably more focused on the private uses of philosophy than were Peirce and Dewey. James equates “truth with good” in some sense. In particular James argues that religious beliefs which do not admit application of the pragmatic maxim are “true in so far” as they result in some good, including emotional benefits to the believer.

(5) Since my focus is on the guidance that pragmatism can lend to social inquiry, I am conflating the mature version of Dewey’s philosophy and Peirce’s views on science, which the
mature Dewey largely accepts. Dewey explicitly states that when he refers to the practical consequences of a hypothesis he means observable, palpable, detectable, consequential. The opposite of what Dewey means by practical is inconsequential, indiscernible, having no empirical implications of any kind. For Dewey or Peirce, a false belief that has some beneficial effect on the believer is still false and the truth is “good” only in the sense that it is a reliable guide to behavior. (It is not good that a rattlesnake is poisonous but it is true and this truth can alert one to the advisability of avoiding rattlesnake bites.)

Dewey is unequivocally a realist (that is, not a Popperian instrumentalist) when it comes to entities in scientific theories, as is Peirce. James’s emphasis on pluralism and his focus on the private benefits of beliefs make him seem ambiguous about issues of realism and relativism.

**Post-Classical Pragmatism** (6) Pragmatism has some connections to late positivism and to linguistic philosophy that result in the labeling of some philosophers as pragmatists. First there is the intellectual genealogy. Dewey’s successor at the University of Chicago brought in Rudolf Carnap, a leading member of The Vienna Circle. Carnap perceived pragmatism as a sort of crude proto-positivism and added “pragmatics” to the lexicon of linguistic philosophy. Even some of Dewey’s own students embraced positivism. W. v.O. Quine, a linguistic philosopher and the student of a student of James, partially re-discovered a limited kind of pragmatism in the wake of his critique of the untenability of “the two dogmas of empiricism.” Quine is sometimes described as pragmatist as are other linguistic philosophers have gotten themselves into an intellectual bind and groped their way back in direction of the classical version of pragmatism.

Some institutional economists explicitly claim guidance from Deweyan principles. But they embrace positivism (or something close) as their *de facto* philosophy of science with the
twist that judgments of value can be established in the same more or less positivistic manner as scientific determinations. This permits the claim that an allegedly “instrumental” evaluation -- in Dewey’s not Popper’s sense of instrumental -- backs the policy alternative being advocated, whether or not the conclusion was based on the reflection, critical attitude and use of experience that genuine Deweyan instrumentalism requires.

(7) Rortyan pragmatism and pragmatism a` la Postmodernism. Richard Rorty has greatly influenced the contemporary view of pragmatism. Unlike the phantom philosophical pragmatists, most of whom seem not to have actually read any of the classical pragmatists, Rorty has read Dewey and James. Rorty even describes himself as a Deweyan pragmatist, which is highly misleading because Rorty deconstructs and reconstructs Dewey to create a new kind of “pragmatism” that is antithetical to Dewey’s philosophical approach.

Rorty takes his lead from Dewey’s critique of the spectator theory of knowledge, in which knowledge results from passive reception of facts by the mind. Thus the mind is a metaphorical mirror of nature. The philosophical theory of truth associated with such a view of knowledge is correspondence theory. That is, truth is the representation of the world in the mirror of the mind that corresponds faithfully to the existent world in every way. The role of the philosopher is to be a sort of professional mirror polisher, providing improved clarity through epistemology.

Dewey replaces the spectator theory of knowledge with an experimentalist theory of knowledge, in which the consequences of a hypothesis are checked against experience, providing warranted assertibility when consequences experienced correspond to consequences hypothesized. Note that Dewey is a realist in the Peircean sense. Because the world has a
“brute existence” independent of what anyone thinks about it, experience can surprise us and teach us. In contemporary terminology, Dewey says that knowledge is mediated through conceptual devices applied by a cooperative community. But experience is real and can take the form of a solitary individual interacting with a physical object, say in a scientific laboratory.

Rorty substitutes “conversation” for Dewey’s “inquiry” and argues that the “conversation” is not constrained by anything other than a consensus among those conversing. Unlike Rorty, Dewey argues that experience has primacy over and regulates discourse. James Guoinlock argues that, though Rorty refers to himself as a Deweyan pragmatist, Rorty believes that major chunks of Dewey’s thought should be disregarded. In particular Logic: The Theory of Inquiry should never have been written. Rorty feels that Dewey’s admiration of science is entirely misguided and that there is nothing useful to be learned from the way that scientists approach inquiry qua inquiry. Rorty explicitly accepts Guoinlock’s characterization of him on this topic.

Recalling Hickman’s analysis, one element in the pattern of inquiry is the purpose of inquiry. Rorty’s overt purpose is de-bunking professional philosophy. Implicitly his purpose is facilitating private intellectual amusement (“edification”). Dewey’s broad purpose -- the role of philosophy as he sees it -- is the amelioration of conditions created by industrial capitalism through democratic means. Dewey sees fostering critical reasoning in the population at large as a necessary to do this. Dewey’s pragmatism focuses on the role of philosophy in the solution of real social problems and sees philosophy itself as a public enterprise on a number of different levels of meaning.
But Rorty does not take this direction. His theoretical starting point is discourse. Rorty’s analysis is very reminiscent of the language game interpretation of the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, where consensus within the speech community establishes linguistic practice which cannot be formalized. Thus Rorty has a consensus theory: the truth is nothing more or less than a consensus among members of a relevant speech community.

Rorty has faith that the linguistic practice within various speech communities will generally serve useful purposes but he does not think philosophical analysis can illuminate how such useful purposes are served. Rorty thinks that if “scientific method” is not something reducible to an algorithm, then nothing meaningful can be said about it. Science succeeds, according to Rorty not because of dedication to a particular method of inquiry but because of social solidarity among the scientific community.

Rorty’s emphasis on the private benefits of philosophical edification are more reminiscent of James than Dewey. Rorty’s faith in liberal democracy is unarticulated and unrelated to philosophical analysis. Rorty’s consensus theory of truth excludes that part of the public which is outside the particular conversation group. This contrasts sharply with Dewey. His experimentalism reflects a view of scientific inquiry that is fundamentally public, albeit requiring a public trained in reflective inquiry and committed to experience as the arbiter of warranted assertibility.

Rorty’s version of pragmatism lends itself to elitism, as D.N. McCloskey’s appropriation of Rortyan pragmatism demonstrates. Her very Rortyan assertions about the indistinguishability of economic science from poetry should be recognized as an another immunization stratagem to replace Friedman’s earlier one. Both are intended to permanently
protect neoclassical economic theory from criticism and empirical refutation. McCloskey’s blather about protecting economics from philosophers of science is best seen as elitist bullying intended to delimit the “conversation” to those uncritical of neoclassical economics and laissez-faire policies.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

James Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey* is a useful beginning to read about Dewey’s thought. It is helpful in dealing with Dewey’s idiom.

John Dewey, “What Pragmatism Means by Practical” (in *Essays in Experimental Logic*.) This was an answer to William James’s attempt to include the philosophical views of Dewey and Peirce under the rubric of Pragmatism. Dewey rejects it.

______________. “The Construction of Good” (in *The Quest for Certainty*) is good place to on Dewey’s approach to ethical analysis.

James Guoinlock, “What Is the Legacy of Instrumentalism? Rorty’s Interpretation of Dewey.” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, ed. Herman Saatkampp. This is an edited collection of critiques of Rorty and Rorty’s response to these critiques. This is probably the best format for getting at what a philosopher really believes.

Larry Hickman, *John Dewey’s Pragmatism Technology* provides a very useful presentation of how Dewey’s analysis of inquiry varies according to the context of inquiry (science, ethics, esthetics or technology).
Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism” (in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*). This contains Rorty’s very influential -- especially in Postmodernist circles -- treatment of pragmatism as conversation.

“Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.” Rorty takes part of Dewey (critique of the Spectator Theory) and but, *contra* Dewey, rejects the importance and primacy of experience over discourse. Rorty also uses truncated allusions to Kuhn and Gadamer that seem to distort their views to fit his version of re-invented “pragmatism.”

William James, “What Pragmatism Means” (in *Pragmatism*). This was done shortly before James died in 1910. James was the most famous philosopher in America by far and relatively well known by the public. Dewey was still young and less well known publicly than he would be later, teaching at Columbia and engaged in spirited debates with his colleagues in the philosophy department there.

Paul A. Schilpp and Lewis E. Hahn, editors, *The Philosophy of John Dewey*. 3d This is a set of articles about Dewey, some favorable and some quite critical, to which Dewey responds. This forum includes critics of Dewey such as Bertrand Russell and Hans Reichenbach (and Dewey’s replies to them). It provides a opportunity to see whether or not the accusation of pretentious gossip made against generic philosophical pragmatism seems justified.