

MODERNITY AND PRAGMATISM¹

Emil Višňovský

Slovak Academy of Sciences

visnovskye@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Pragmatism is a philosophy that has grown out of the specific conditions of modernity (the urban environment of Boston and Chicago at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and that belongs more widely to the Protestant-based way of thinking that shapes the 'spirit' of Western civilisation, specifically in the USA. Despite this the relationship between the philosophy of pragmatism and modern civilisation, which is the core of this paper, is far more complex. Pragmatism is not simply the 'child' of modernity and it is certainly not an ideology of technocraticism, scientism or even economism, as its perfunctory critics like to declare. Classical pragmatism was a version of modern philosophy that stood in critical opposition to modernity, in some aspects even preceding postmodernism. This paper also demonstrates the relevance of neopragmatism in the critique and reconstruction of contemporary late modernity.

Introduction

The history of philosophy is replete with different 'turns' – thus, it also constitutes the history of these 'turns': first of all there was the epochal *anthropological turn* set in motion by the Sophists and their critical pupil Socrates during the time of antiquity. We would most certainly also find turns in the history of medieval philosophy (albeit if only in the shape of personal turns such as that of Augustine, from a worldly life to a holy life, which, nonetheless, had fundamental consequences for philosophy). Even though philosophy seems to have developed continually over the centuries, with no epochal turn of any kind, the history of modern philosophy is far more dynamic: at its centre lies a well-known, perhaps even the most well-known, turn of all – *Kant's Copernican turn*. This was the culmination of what the philosophical historian John Smith has called the 'reflexive turn', commencing before the time of Kant during the period of Descartes and Locke – and referred to more in European terminology as a shift towards the

subject or also as an *epistemological turn*. Thus, since Kant, the history of modern philosophy has been full of turns, full to bursting, as it were: from the *hermeneutic turn* associated not so much with Schleiermacher or Dilthey as with Heidegger and Gadamer, and in particular, the *linguistic turn*, associated primarily with Russell and Frege, but also symbolised generally by Wittgenstein. Yet another turn remained on the fringes of these turns, the *pragmatist turn* – a turn towards pragmatism – which, however, has made a come-back in the context of another recent turn: the *postmodernist turn* (even if we cannot equate them). In the history of modern philosophy we might also include – *à la* Kuhn – the following four paradigmatic shifts: 1. Cartesian-Kantian, 2. hermeneutic, 3. linguistic, 4. pragmatist and their conversations – in a Rortyan sense.²

It is this fourth turn – or the *relationship between modernity and pragmatism* – that is the subject of my paper. Namely, what is modernity in relation to pragmatism and what is pragmatism in relation to modernity? I shall divide this question into two constituent, if rather complex, themes: the first being the situatedness of *pragmatism in modernity* and the second being *the reflection of modernity in pragmatism*.

² However, very recently still another turn has appeared, the „speculative turn“ initiated and endorsed by American „speculative realist“ Graham Harman defining his philosophy as „object-oriented“. Despite being directed against post-Kantian and postmodern (textualist) continental philosophy, this seems to be an explicit return to pre-modern philosophy (of Aristotle and others), to some sources of medieval philosophy and to Leibniz's metaphysics, and thus overtly anti-pragmatist (e.g. with their opposition to „correlationism“). But on the other hand some proponents of this „turn“ also evoke Peirce's metaphysics and Whitehead's process philosophy. See: L. Bryant, N. Srnicek and G. Harman, eds. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re.press, 2011.

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1. The situatedness of pragmatism in modernity

This topic contains within it a whole series of historical and philosophical questions: What is the place of pragmatism in the history of modern (and/or Western) philosophy (and more broadly, in the history of modern culture)? How does pragmatism 'fit into' this history, if at all? How does it connect with the main streams of thought in modernity, or, how does it oppose them? What has pragmatism brought to Western modern philosophy that is new (and different); what is not (or would not be) there, was it not for pragmatism?

Clearly nobody would object to the suggestion that 'pragmatism is modern philosophy' and one of its constituent parts (and not simply from a temporal perspective); although the premise that applies the most is that *the concept of modern philosophy* – however universalised (and this universalisation is one of its features) – is still predominantly *Eurocentric* (indeed, so is the very concept of philosophy that we have become used to employing).³ Psychologically, this is perhaps natural; philosophically, this does us little credit, particularly in the post-enlightenment and global era. William James (a brilliant psychologist) described this psychological convention thus: when a new philosophy emerges, the first stage is where established philosophers attempt to marginalise and ignore the new philosophy, during the second stage, they try to silence it through criticism and in the third stage they begin almost to declare themselves as the original authors. This convention can clearly be applied more widely, not

³ For instance, the well-known and important Oxford philosophical historian Anthony Kenny (1931-) does not recognize pragmatism in his *A Brief History of Western Philosophy* (1998, Czech translation 2000); neither does Roger Scruton (1944-) in his *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (1981, Slovak translation 1991), much read in Slovakia. While Kenny does at least partially correct this in the fourth volume of his *A New History of Western Philosophy* entitled *Philosophy in the Modern World* (2007) when writing about Peirce and James (although not, however, about Dewey), Scruton continues to ignore pragmatism in the second edition of his history (2002).

only to philosophy, but also to the history of pragmatism, where it fits like a glove.

What kind of philosophy then is pragmatism? In the context of modernity and modern philosophy (and its history), I can only very briefly introduce here the three fundamental characteristics of pragmatism.

Firstly, pragmatism is a philosophy that has developed out of two roots: the older of which is *European*, and the younger *North American*; at the same time, it is difficult to say which is more significant. It depends on the interpretation. Nonetheless, thus far the most widespread story about the history of pragmatism, emphasising American exceptionalism and originality, is now starting to be counterbalanced by a more complete story.

For instance, according to Robert Brandon, a most original contemporary new pragmatist, pragmatism is a *synthesis of German idealism and Darwinism*. Brandon begins his most recent work⁴ with the claim that "Kant was just as important to the classical pragmatists as he is to pragmatists today" and it is from Kant that he takes his two crucial ideas: 1. a normative turn (i.e. the notion that our opinions and actions are subject to evaluation, that we are responsible for them and that they represent our obligations; and 2. pragmatist methodology (i.e. the idea that actions and opinions, and also our evaluation of them, are the things that we do, carry out). Brandon himself conceives of his philosophy not as 'analytic pragmatism' (as it was known until recently) but as 'rational pragmatism', that is, as linking new pragmatism with rationalism, which is a response to the linguistic turn, i.e. it cannot avoid being conceived of as a philosophy of language. Brandon conceives this pragmatist philosophy of language on the basis of the concept of practices in such a way as to distinguish

⁴ R. B. Brandon: *Perspectives on Pragmatism (Classical, Recent and Contemporary)*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.

between discursive (linguistic) and non-discursive (extra-linguistic) practices, where the first are simply the intentional articulation of the second. Non-discursive (extra-linguistic) practices are therefore (ontologically) fundamental; within them norms are spontaneously created that we articulate as rules and principles at the level of language. According to Brandom, this means that in theories of language, pragmatics should take precedence over semantics, and not vice versa, as has traditionally been the case and remains so.⁵

Similarly, Sami Pihlström interprets the tradition of pragmatism in the history of philosophy and particularly its roots as being more Eurocentric than Americanist.⁶ He also emphasises the synthesis between Kant and Darwin. According to Pihlström, pragmatists resolve the same questions that Kant's critical project dealt with, that is, what the conditions of human experience are (theoretical and practical, scientific and moral); although, the pragmatists, unlike Kant, do not see these conditions in the transcendental structures of human thought, rather they see them in historically changing human practices, or in the norms created within these practices. The pragmatists, just like Kant, begin from the perspective of the subject, which structures reality through its activities; however, they naturalise the subject's reason and activity, i.e. in the spirit of Darwinian inspiration they anchor them primarily in natural reality, within which sociocultural activity and reality also emerge and exist.

This new kind of interpretation of the pragmatist tradition simply shows in the end that the classical founders were right, for they themselves had pointed to the European roots of their philosophy, acknowledging

and follow on from them: Peirce in relation to Kant⁷, James in relation to Mill, Dewey in relation to F. Bacon and Hegel, and Rorty in relation to Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Without European philosophy then, there would have been no pragmatism in the USA either, although it is not simply the recipient of European influences.

Secondly, pragmatism is a philosophy that *critically* defines itself in relation to other directions taken by modern (but also older) philosophy.⁸ It is a critique of modern philosophy 'from within'; despite the fact that the American environment meant that it could be viewed from another viewpoint and distance. The pragmatists do not accept any philosophical truth as given, unconditionally, and they do not think that contemporary and future philosophers necessarily need pose the same questions as those of the past did, nor that they have to resolve them in the same way. Of course, discontinuity in the history of philosophy is not a matter of free will or subjectivism, and certainly not a fashion, but has certain 'logic'. Pragmatism is not subjectivism, but critical investigation.

Above all, pragmatism is *anti-Cartesianism*, in that it deconstructs the individual fundamentals of modern philosophy and consequently some do not hesitate to refer to its 'father', Peirce, as the first postmodernist.⁹ Continuity between Peirce and Descartes is found in the fact that both sought to resolve the same problem: to find a method of arriving at clear, perspicuous ideas in our thinking; however, the 'logic' of their attitude and approach led them both to entirely different conclusions. Another shared moment between Peirce and Descartes is that both were concerned with scientific knowledge as an epistemic ideal. Peirce's

⁵ Brandom outlined the basis of his pragmatic theory in his earlier writing: *Making it Explicit* (1994), *Articulating Reasons* (2000), *Between Saying and Doing* (2008), *Reason in Philosophy* (2009).

⁶ S. Pihlström, ed.: *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism*. London and New York: Continuum, 2011.

⁷ Peirce defined pragmatism as Kantianism without the thing-in-itself.

⁸ Including Kantianism and Darwinism, in not taking epistemological the centrism from Kant, and not applying Darwinism to social sphere.

⁹ For instance, the semiotician John Deely.

concept of inquiry as a practical manifestation of the fact that man is by nature “an inquisitive and inquiring being” is, however, far more complex than Descartes’ theory of knowledge. Peirce is Descartes reconstructed and cannot be reduced simply to this.

Similarly, pragmatism in theoretical philosophy, that is, philosophy as thinking about being, thinking and acting (in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics), opposes Kantianism in its approach and method of conceptualisation (and thus carries the hallmark of anti-Kantianism), and indeed also Platonism (and can therefore be characterised as anti-Platonism).¹⁰ Hence, Peirce and James defined their philosophy primarily as a method of solving philosophical questions in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. as a universal or complete approach to philosophical (and other scientific and moral) problems on a meta-level in general (as a meta-method or metaphilosophy). It is not, however, true that pragmatism is simply a kind of anti-philosophy. Pragmatism has its own metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and so forth; therefore, it has its own conception of traditional and new philosophical questions. Pragmatism as philosophy is, in the first instance, a theory of meaning (statements and acts) and a theory of truth. Further, pragmatism contains and develops, in a positive sense, philosophical conceptions such as the theory of inquiry, the theory of experience, the theory of acts, etc. Concepts such as these include, for instance, naturalism in metaphysics, fallibilism, and radical empiricism in epistemology, ontological and axiological pluralism, ethical meliorism and so forth.

Thirdly, pragmatism is a type of modern practical philosophy, since part of its philosophical identity is grasping the practical nature of human being in its

entirety including thought itself and philosophy as an intellectual practice, and at the same time re-orientating philosophy towards current human problems.

The philosophy of pragmatism contains other fundamental characteristics (historicism, contextualism, romanticism...), which I cannot consider in detail here. To conclude this section, I shall simply proffer a quotation by Habermas, who in answer to Mitchel Aboulafia’s question, “*What do you see as the most lasting contribution of pragmatism to the tradition of Western philosophy and social thought?*”, replied thus: “Alongside Marx and Kierkegaard pragmatism emerges as the only approach that embraces modernity in its most radical forms and acknowledges its contingencies, without sacrificing the very purpose of Western philosophy – namely, to try out explanations of who we are and what we would like to be as individuals, as members of our communities, and as persons *überhaupt* that is, as man”.¹¹

2. The Reflection of Modernity in Pragmatism

Pragmatism is unquestionably the product of American culture in the historical stage of its development that might be characterised as the ascent and peak of *modernisation*, if we also take into account features such as industrialisation, urbanisation, and the growth of business, technology and capitalism generally. It is a philosophy that has grown out of the specific conditions of modernity (the urban environment of Boston and Chicago at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and that belongs more widely to the Protestant-based way of thinking that shapes the ‘spirit’ of Western civilisation, specifically in the USA.¹² The

¹⁰ Overall pragmatism is anti-absolutism in philosophy: it does not seek life-saving formulas or miraculous truths independent of human effort, or the historical situation or culture, nor does it seek imperatives that would overcome the contingency, variability and plurality of the world in which we live.

¹¹ M. Aboulafia, M. Bookman, and C. Kemp, eds.: *Habermas and Pragmatism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 229.

¹² It was W. James who pointed out the connection with the Protestant spirit of capitalism. There are, however, other stories of pragmatism as an original American philosophy whose roots mean that it fits into the pre-urban, agrarian community of the first ‘settler pioneers’

pragmatists themselves were staunch supporters of the *idea of progress*, most notably represented by J. Dewey, when he became one of the central figures of the first phase of the reform *movement of progressivism* (1890-1929).¹³ The main outcome of this wide social, political and intellectual movement was the transformation of the wild, unregulated capitalism of the USA into a more regulated version (including, for instance, the fight against corruption). Dewey, however, within all this, concentrated on *education*, which he considered to be a deciding factor in progress alongside democracy.¹⁴ At that time, Dewey began developing his thoughts on technology in terms of his concept of instrumentalism; it is, however, a mistake to characterise him as a technocrat or 'social engineer'.¹⁵ Approaches such as these date from later (after 1945) and in spirit they are closer to the philosophy of positivism with its ideas on theory (science) as an instrument to be applied by experts to achieve their 'objective goals'. Dewey's philosophy of technology is construed within Aristotelian and Hegelian terminology, linked with the idea of participative democracy and, especially, the key notion of creative intelligence as a type of rationality, comprising not only knowledge and science, but also values and morals. Dewey is Kant reconstructed and this reconstruction lies within an amalgam of critique, creativity and action (hence, all three of Kant's critiques).

When, however, Dewey was to reflect later, in his main socio-philosophical work¹⁶, on the outcome of progressivism and the state of American culture and society, he was not overenthusiastic. On the contrary, he

(S. Pratt, P. Thompson, T. Hilde).

¹³ The movement continues today and still has its protagonists, including for instance the dissident N. Chomsky, the 'prophetic pragmatist' C. West, the cognitive scientist and philosopher G. Lakoff, and others.

¹⁴ It was at this time that he was working on his philosophy of education, the synthesis of which is his *Democracy and Education* (1916).

¹⁵ As did the members of the Frankfurt School and as L. Hickman refuted in his work.

¹⁶ *The Public and its Problems* (1927); *Individualism Old and New* (1930); *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935); *Freedom and Culture* (1939).

talked of this culture being in crisis and was critical of the "money culture", since "[t]he money medium of exchange ... drastically condition[s] the other activities of the people"; he talked of "religious prosperity" as "dedicated to making money"; and of economic determinism as practiced, of "a house divided against itself", where the inhabitants are spiritually confused, upset and troubled; of an "enormous industrial machine", for which we are neither mentally nor morally prepared; of the "quantification, mechanization and standardization" of life; of the "absence of critical thinking" and mass persuasion; of uniformity and the "lost individual"; of the dominance of corporatism, mass production and consumption; of the rule of the financial oligarchy and the disintegration of society; of mediocre and conformist government; of "the scandal of private appropriation of socially produced values", and even of corruption as a moral perversion, etc. And what kind of therapy did he propose in relation to this diagnosis? In addition to education and democracy in the broader sense¹⁷, he talked of a new individualism and a new liberalism, of the need for social regulation of the economy, of institutions and norms embodied in the new social organisation generally, based on intelligence as a means of creatively solving problems and on broad social cooperation in the name of the development of all individuals and their freedom to achieve self-realisation. Dewey outlined a vision of social liberalism or liberal socialism which remained undeveloped and misunderstood.

In conclusion, let us return from Dewey to the philosophy of modernity. What is the central problem in modernity (as an epoch and as a culture) and thus with modern philosophy as well? I incline towards the opinion of those philosophers who see this problem in terms of a conflict between *knowledge and values* (truth and

¹⁷ The cure to the problem with democracy, he believes, is not more democracy (quantity), but better democracy (quality); namely, participative democracy.

meaning, science and morality)¹⁸ and/or between rationality as an instrument of power, and rationality as an instrument of cooperation (as Habermas would put it between instrumental and communicative rationality), but also between technology and humanism, that is, between the 'two cultures' within modern culture. Modernity is based on the 'knowledge industry' (Dewey's term) and on 'religious rationality' in contrast to the old pre-modern values, framed in the Western world in terms of Christianity, which find themselves at a disadvantage in this conflict. And the way out of this is evidently not Kant's brilliant intuition that we should "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith". This central conflict between knowledge and values results in and is manifest in the oscillation and bifurcation of modern philosophy. After all, the branch that has since the beginning been fashioned along the lines of a science has survived quite successfully in this frame, but it does face the risk of being accused of scientism. The second branch, reliant not only on faith but also on art, has existential problems. Postmodernity means that a system and models based on 'pure science' either violate us or disintegrate due to resistance to this violence.

One solution could clearly be to bring together and integrate both sides of this conflict into a single complete conception i.e. to philosophically demonstrate how it is possible for there to be harmony between knowledge and values. So long as we understand science to be an 'objective truth' and justify our actions using precisely this kind of knowledge, and, on the other hand, as long as we understand values to be pure subjective constructions, and as long as our conception of human and social good is dominated by the ideology of scientism, which posits that scientific truth is the greatest good that shows the way into the future, then we shall remain nominally in the clutches of the old dichotomy between knowledge and values, but in reality

we subscribe to the highest values of knowledge, science and rationality as ends within themselves. Yet have we not noticed that knowledge is a means rather than a goal and that value-free science does not exist? Science is a value, but can it stand in the way of our values? Should it not be philosophy that investigates the way in which knowledge and values are connected?

Pragmatism by its nature is an anti-dualist philosophy that seeks to resolve precisely this core conflict of modernity by investigating "how things relate to one another" and one of the fundamental dualisms that it concurrently reconstructs is the *dichotomy between facts and values* where it demonstrate that pure facts and pure values do not exist.¹⁹ Pragmatism is a rational and humanistic reconstruction of modern philosophy with an open programme and end-point.

¹⁸ For instance, H. S. Thayer (1923-2008): *Meaning and Action. A Critical History of Pragmatism*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981 (1968 by The Bobbs-Merrill Comp. Inc).

¹⁹ H. Putnam: *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.