

## INTRODUCTION: PRAGMATISM ON ACTION, AGENCY AND PRACTICE. AN OVERVIEW

Philipp Dorstewitz, Frithjof Nungesser

Action is the central concept around which pragmatism pivots. Right from the beginnings of the tradition conceptual reconstructions pointed at human agency in redefining concepts like truth, meaning, experience, knowledge, education, value or the self. Thinking in terms of action helped pragmatism to overcome dualist accounts of the relation between mind and body, theory and practice, individual and society, ordinary life and the supposedly detached realm of the arts and sciences. Many pragmatists since Dewey and Addams went beyond finding new conceptual determinations and saw the point of their philosophical investigations in changing our social and political practices by means of a reciprocal engagement of practical endeavors and intellectual inquiries.

Various projects in philosophy, social theory, sociology, or the cognitive sciences paid tribute to pragmatists like Peirce, Dewey or Mead in developing a new understanding of practice, meaning, perception, interaction, communication, identity, institutions, or the transactive continuum of human and non-human agency in environments. Yet, given the central position that the concept of action occupies in the pragmatist tradition, it is remarkable how few pragmatist scholars took an explicit agency-theoretic approach in delineating their standpoint. This said, a number of prominent authors have zeroed in on the way pragmatism affects our understanding of agency and practice. Classical works like Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* or Mead's *Philosophy of the Act* precede a number of more recent works like Bernstein's *Praxis and Action*, Joas's *The Creativity of Action* or Strauss's *Continual Permutations of Action*.

Today's advances in fields like biology, robotics and artificial intelligence, human enhancement technology, or digital technology make questions about the transactive formation of coordinated agency and about the environmentally embedded nature of human action topical. Looming environmental catastrophes and failure

of political systems to respond adequately pose urgent questions about collective and political agency and urge the search for solutions in a better understanding of human agency as embedded in social and environmental situations.

The articles assembled in this special issue of *Pragmatism Today* address implications and consequences of pragmatist thought for our understanding of action, agency and practice. The papers prove once more that the pragmatist conceptualization of action provides an instructive perspective in a broad spectrum of areas. This holds true with respect to the topics analyzed, which range from embodiment and animal cognition to sociality and socialization to games and sports to normativity and justice. It also holds true with respect to the transdisciplinarity of the special issue, which contains articles from philosophers and sociologists but also touches on issues in sport science, cognitive science, or primatology. Finally, the breadth and timeliness of the pragmatist account of action, agency, and practice can be recognized in the volume by the dialogues it facilitates with other theoretical traditions such as phenomenology or cultural psychology.

The first three articles in the special issue deal with questions of agency, practice and embodiment. In "The Primacy of Practice and the Phenomenological Method", Daniil Koloskov reconstructs the relation between practices and meanings. He uses Heidegger's ontological analysis, which holds that meaning discloses itself through projection (*Entwurf*) and that it is the possibilities and limitations of such projections which free objects to realize their being, a move that resembles to some extent Dewey's proposal to include experience as a practical transactive process within, rather than juxtaposed to reality. The question which Koloskov sees unsatisfactorily treated by both pragmatists and the Heidegger interpreter, Dreyfus, is the exact relation between background practices and meaning. Whereas the latter sees meaning firmly grounded in a primacy of practice and determined by social habits, from which they source their significance and possibilities, Koloskov

argues that understanding and practices are “equiprimordial” because meaning making and projection include the possibility to refine our practices by understanding or even reconsidering them in view of new possibilities that open up within given constraints. Koloskov sees this non-reductive interpretation of the relationship between meaning and practice better realized in Heidegger’s original than in his commentators. Heidegger introduces Dasein as the “ability-to-be” and his understanding of a background as “Spielraum” or a set of interrelated possibilities resonates with Koloskov’s own view that “meaning itself is pragmatic”.

In his article, Ondřej Švec engages Robert Brandom and Hubert Dreyfus in an instructive dialogue on “Situating Acting and Embodied Coping”. For each thinker Švec starts with what he conceives as the key strength of the approach and then identifies a major shortcoming. Brandom’s pragmatist account of action, he argues, provides a convincing argument for the constitutive social embeddedness of human action. By conceptualizing the motives and reasons for action not as private mental states but in terms of the agent’s public commitments and entitlements Brandom shows that agency and sociality are ineluctably intertwined. However, according to Švec, this elaborate account of the social embeddedness of practical commitments suffers from an intellectualist bias since Brandom conceives of bodily action merely as the execution of these practical commitments. This is the point where Dreyfus comes into the picture. From Švec’s perspective, Dreyfus’s approach is the mirror image of Brandom’s, because he conceptualizes action primarily as absorbed and embodied coping. By doing so, Dreyfus considers not only the seminal role of bodily and affective processes in human agency but also the situatedness and contingency of action. Yet, Dreyfus’s approach also mirrors the shortcomings of Brandom’s because it downplays the importance of the agent’s discursive and conceptual capacities. Building on his critical comparison of Brandom and Dreyfus Švec aims to preserve the best of both philosophical worlds by reconstructing the “continuity” between practical, and especially normative,

reasoning and embodied coping skills. By doing so, one could say, that Švec follows the antidualist impulse of classical pragmatism to critically engage with two important contributions to contemporary philosophical debates.

The spectrum of forms of agentive involvement with the world, with other human beings and with one’s own body is nowhere more variegated than in games and sports. This can be seen in Raúl Martínez-Santos’s paper “Time, Order, and Motor Action Domains: On the Praxiological Classification of Sporting Games.” Following closely the methodology outlined by Pierre Parlebas, Martínez-Santos offers a motor-praxiological study of human agency through the lens of various games, ranging from judo and tennis to chess and snooker. All games coincide in their nature as embodied processes, and all games and “ludic situation” are made possible by participants taking a position in systems of rules, laws and signs. Most of them involve some form of temporally sequential or simultaneous social interaction. However, the difference between games are very telling, not merely phenomenologically, but in a motor praxiological and motor semiotic sense. Whereas the rules and the temporal structure of judo or tennis require participants to engage in mutually perceived simultaneous gesturing, games like snooker or darts will be social in a more strategic and sequential way. These important differences are not only of epistemic value for understanding the panoply of different forms of bodily, social, cognitive and rule-governed interactions. They also help reconceptualizing physical education by providing an orientational praxiological grid of dimensions and criteria that can help engaging and developing diverse forms of engagement with one’s body in social, temporal, spatial, interactive, strategic, and rule-governed situations in students.

The relation of agency, interaction and sociality is discussed in the next two articles. Antonia Schirgi provides an in-depth investigation of crucial concepts of Mead’s pragmatist theory, which take center stage both in his understanding of action and of sociality. The main objective of

her analysis is to trace the “The Manifoldness of Mead’s Action Theory”. This manifoldness, she claims, is due not only to the fact that Mead uses different concepts when studying action but also to the changes in these concepts over time. To substantiate her claim Schirgi distinguishes three main concepts of action in Mead: a “wider model of action”, the “social act”, and the “gesture”. The first concept, developed mainly by Dewey in the 1890s, was of critical importance for the development of Mead’s thought. The second concept, the “social act”, Schirgi argues, was developed later and changed significantly between the 1910s and the 1920s. While in the earlier writings social interaction resembled a chain of individual social acts, later the social act was conceptualized as a complex entanglement of the actions of multiple individuals. The third concept, the “gesture”, was also reformulated over time. Modifying arguments of Darwin and Wundt, Mead first thought of gestures as fixed communicative signals that evolved through the truncation of social interaction (e.g., biting turned into baring of teeth). Later, in the 1920s, the concept of gestures became much broader comprising every action that initiated a social interaction. Schirgi’s analysis is a valuable contribution to Mead studies because it forces scholars to look more closely into the development of key concepts of Mead. If her argument is correct, conceptual inconsistencies in Mead’s writings could be interpreted not as theoretical contradictions but as the result of theoretical developments. Also, Schirgi’s argument could be instructive for pragmatist social thought more generally because, as she indicates in her concluding remarks, different readings of Mead (such as Joas’s or Blumer’s) might be connected to the fact that they draw on different versions of Mead’s key concepts.

Within the framework of Mead’s pragmatism, human agency is based on the capacity of perspective-taking, which makes it possible to act in a self-reflexive and intelligent way and to adjust behavior according to cultural norms and social expectations. In “The Social Evolution of Perspective-taking”, Frithjof Nungesser looks into Mead’s account of the evolutionary emergence of per-

spective-taking and contrasts it with Michael Tomasello’s seminal contributions to primatology, evolutionary anthropology, and cultural psychology. Tomasello’s studies, he claims, help to overcome two key shortcomings of Mead’s theory: First, insights into great ape social interaction and cognition help to correct Mead’s dichotomous comparison of animals and humans. Second, Tomasello’s work allows for a more gradualist reconstruction of the emergence of perspective-taking in the course of humanization. Based on the dialogue between Mead and Tomasello, Nungesser argues, it becomes possible to outline a refined conception of perspective-taking that distinguishes between three forms of perspective-taking that vary in complexity: While simple forms of perspective-taking already evolved before the advent of humanity and can today be found in non-human primates (and probably other animals), the two complex forms of perspective-taking only evolved in the course of hominin evolution – first with the genus *Homo*, later with the species *Homo sapiens*. According to Nungesser, this distinction between three forms of perspective-taking also helps to dissolve contradictions between Mead’s account of human evolution and his well-known arguments on the development of perspective-taking in the course of socialization.

The last two contributions to this special issue discuss questions of agency, value and normativity. Hugh McDonald pursues his project of presenting a pragmatist interpretation of value-theory as a first philosophy. In his contribution “Action and Creation of the World”, he develops this idea from an agency theoretic perspective. He maintains that the determination of value should be mostly free from “psychologizing”, and that values cannot be defined in terms of either subjective or nonempirical properties. McDonald’s argument tries to avoid two extremes: that of reducing values to vacuous normativity, and that of cashing out values in terms of empirical consequences defined by a predetermined success criterion. However, instead of relying on given value determinations

or reducing final purposes to set premises in practical inferences, he understands values as manifested in the structure of human agency. For McDonald values are constitutive of the realization of actions. If we, like many pragmatists since Dewey, accept that reality is an unfolding process in which human activity plays a participating role, and if we agree that values are constitutive for the direction and manifestation of activity, we shall accept that values play a role in creating the world. This is what McDonald identifies as the movement of “creative actualization”; it is, indeed, a metaphysical determination of values. Moreover, values give structure and definition to reality: as actions are coordinated and concluded by goals, values make courses of actions (i.e. instances of world making) plural and countable. The normative character of values is preserved in McDonald’s adherence to a Jamesian idea of meliorism. The actualization of values in human action is the successive and cumulative realization of goods. While these may never be perfect, they still allow, and even demand, the effort to improve and refine values and achieve better goals.

Inquiry into democratic deliberation as a practice (rather than an ideal or standard derived from foundational normative principles) raises an important question: what role should our theories play in our democratic practices? In his article “What is Normative Democratic Theory for? Beyond Procedural Minimalism”, Quinlan Bowman suggests that normative democratic theory should emerge out of reflection on lived experience with democratic values. Focusing on lived experience with “free” and “equal” treatment serves to clarify what motivates people to engage in democratic deliberation in the first place. It also clarifies what responsibilities people typically assume when they do treat each other as “free and

equal.” Normative theories that are grounded in actual human experiences of pursuing and deliberating over moral ends are best equipped to motivate, and so guide, citizens. Bowman criticizes the prominent normative-democratic theories of Robert Dahl, Jürgen Habermas, and Joshua Cohen for being insufficiently attentive to these matters. The reason for this, he suggests, is that each author’s theory is inadequately connected to (observation of) actual (as opposed to idealized) democratic practice. Bowman’s own anthropological-interpretative approach borrows from Dewey’s ideal of democracy as a specific kind of “shared experience,” involving continuous ethical inquiry. Correspondingly, Bowman advances a “doubly empirical” approach to normative democratic theory, which emphasizes the origins of normative theory in democratic experience and points to normative theory’s role in continuously guiding further inquiry.

The collection of papers presented here opens many doors for further discussion and research. A few themes in particular will strike the eye of the reader: the relation between forming actions and understanding our world through practices, ways of defining goods and actualizing values, forming deliberate actions and embedding them within rule-governed practices, understanding the coordination of human behavior and the formation of agency and intentionality as a product of social interactions, the lessons we can learn from non-human behavior for understanding human action and the place of theory within social and democratic deliberation. Collectively these papers stand to reignite an interest in the very core of the pragmatist approach, namely that action is a matter of utmost theoretical importance and that our theories are entangled with our living practice.