

Pragmatism: What's the Use?

Ask a philosopher to end the sentence “It’s as American as _____,” and “pragmatism” might spring to her lips before “apple pie.” But just what is this American invention? And what use is it to us today?

Though “pragmatism” is one of those words that resist definition, we can generally associate it with a genealogy of thinkers who have drawn on the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. For the most part, pragmatists offer us a simple means of thinking, talking, and deliberating about the things that matter most to us. They tell us to resist abstraction, stay close to experience, allow for mistakes and uncertainty, and look to the consequences of what we propose to believe and do. Pragmatism can be seen as a way of approaching life, disagreements, hurdles, and decisions. “Test one hypothesis, answer, or solution against another,” the pragmatist suggests. “Rather than strive to attain absolutes or certainty, try to come up with something that works and makes sense of your experiences.”

Given that they focus on a philosophy that champions the practical, accessible, and sensible, the essays in this issue may seem surprisingly abstract and, perhaps, even irrelevant to daily life. The questions to which they speak, however, are fundamental to the ways we live our lives, think about the world and each other, and make decisions—questions like: How can we best understand the meaning of our lives and experiences? How do we decide what is good to do, especially when there are so many different opinions around? Are our values personal or can we discuss them fruitfully as a society? How can we navigate the deep differences in our society? What do we do when we have different views about what the good thing to do is? Is all talk about truth absolutist and dogmatic? Does rejecting all talk about truth relegate our discussions to the arbitrary and irresponsible?

The contributors to this issue were asked “Can pragmatism free us from the swing between the absolute and the arbitrary?” While there are not many people today who would advertise their views as absolute or celebrate them as arbitrary, our arguments and inquiries *are* easily pulled by these two magnetic poles. On

the one hand, some people think of their claims to truth as more certain or pure than the rest of us think they are. The problem occurs when that certainty leads someone or some group to silence those not in agreement with them. Throughout history, the belief that one has the absolute truth in one's possession has been used to justify killing those not in possession of it.

On the other hand, the rejection of all absolutes can lead one to swing to the opposite side of the pendulum such that everything is arbitrary, subjective, and disposable. If everything is arbitrary, then how do we begin to make decisions about the things that matter to us? There are those who go to work on exaggerated claims, dissolving them and leaving us with such a deflated view of truth that it is not worth bothering with. In our individual lives, despair can set in. If everything is arbitrary, why bother? In social and political life, robust diversity can disintegrate into stolid indifference. If everything is a matter of individual preference, why should we work together to pursue justice and the common good?

The claim that something is an absolute leaves little *room* for discussion, while the claim that all is arbitrary leaves little *reason* for discussion. Is there some middle way, between the heavy absolute and the lightweight arbitrary, that does not lead our discussions of the things that matter most to us into a dead end?

Pragmatists have always argued that their modest method can free us from these frustrations, and our basic interest in this volume is to assess their ability to do this. What are the possibilities and limitations of pragmatism for meeting this challenge? Is pragmatism part of the problem or the solution? What are pragmatism's shortcomings and limitations? When we talk about the questions that seem most pressing in our current cultural situation, does pragmatism help us, particularly when discussions involve speakers with opposing views? What elements of pragmatism might we appropriate more effectively in our pursuit of worthwhile discussions?

Catherine Elgin initiates our inquiry by offering a pragmatic approach to inquiry and argument. Agreeing that the dissolution of exaggerated

knowledge claims tempts us to ask despairingly “What’s the use?” Elgin suggests that we take the question seriously. For when we know what the desired use or outcome is, we have a better idea of how to get there. Asking “What’s the use?” pushes us to make abstract problems more concrete.

Linda Alcoff warns against the tendency of some pragmatists to eliminate “truth talk.” Pragmatists need not move in this direction, but when they do, pragmatism becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Alcoff wants truth talk to be substantive and not just rhetorical. In short, she insists that “truth talk brings in the world.”

Demonstrating how broad the possibilities of pragmatism are, Hans Joas associates pragmatism with the objectivity not only of moral rules but also of norms. To an American audience, which too easily views pragmatism as antagonistic toward the very notion of objectivity, Joas’ approach may come as a bit of a surprise. Joas reminds us that pragmatism is interested not only in specific and temporary questions but also in large enduring ones, to which there may be large and enduring answers. Joas also reminds us that there is a fascinating and fruitful exchange taking place today between Continental thought and the pragmatist tradition.

John Stuhr, Merold Westphal, and Richard Horner are engaged in a conversation about the possible ways to navigate the world in which we live. More specifically, they each evaluate the kinds of understandings of the world that might make sense of our experiences. Stuhr argues that pragmatists (and the rest of us) need to leave behind thoughts of transcendence and spirituality because they lead us away from this world and we have no evidence of their reality. In contrast, Westphal and Horner, each in their own way, suggest that to make sense of our experiences of life we need those understandings of the world that include a richer sense of who humans are.

Stuhr argues that it is odd to frame questions about pragmatism in terms of the absolute and the arbitrary, for this is just the sort of framing of argument that pragmatism demolished over a century ago. But pragmatists themselves, he argues, have been slow to realize this.

Pragmatism needs to get beyond the notion of transcendence and to stop clinging to ideas of spirituality. He calls for a purified pragmatism that accepts its own de-transcendental inheritance and works that inheritance out more consistently than it has to date.

Recognizing pragmatism's openness to large questions and thick answers, Merold Westphal affirms pragmatism's invitation to conversation and then takes this conversation in a direction not often taken. Specifically, he suggests we talk about both the possibility of a divine Other and divine revelation. He also points to the need to talk about the decentering that occurs when we face those whose views are radically other than our own. This decentering, he says, is something that we need rich and humane resources to acknowledge and work through.

Richard Horner follows a similar line of argument. Again affirming the contributions that pragmatists have made, Horner suggests that in the flow of life itself, pragmatic considerations need not lead to the naturalistic understandings of experience so often associated with pragmatism but rather may lead to deeper, thicker, theistic understandings.

It is clear that the question about pragmatism is much larger than the question about how to frame inquiry and argument. It is about life itself—how to think it, how to inquire into it, how to converse about it, how to live it. Our contributors hold a variety of views about how helpful pragmatism turns out to be, and they represent a wide range of views as to what the conclusions are to which pragmatism might lead. Indeed, the interest here is not resolution but invitation and inspiration to open and continue the conversation.

— T. H. R.