

THE POSSIBILITIES OF PRAGMATISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH GILES GUNN

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What Is Pragmatism and What's Its Use?

For some, pragmatism conjures up a blank; we know little about it and certainly not enough to see why it would be relevant to thinking about the world today. Can you give us a working definition of pragmatism and a sense of what resources it offers?

Pragmatism is probably most easily understood as a theory of intellectual inquiry. Charles Sanders Peirce first used the term “pragmatism” in an essay entitled “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” and associated it with a procedure for determining the rational meaning of an idea or concept. For Peirce that meaning could only be established by relating it to its implications for human conduct on the grounds that all distinctions in kind, no matter how fine, are nothing more than possible differences in practice. William James then took Peirce’s insistence on the connection between ideas and their possible consequences and turned pragmatism into both a critical method and a theory of truth.

As a critical method, for which James could find precedents in the work of everyone from Plato and Aristotle to Spinoza, Hume, Kant, and Mill, pragmatism expanded into a belief that the full meaning of any

proposition is to be found, if not in some particular to which it points, then in the particular difference it would make to the course of human experience if it were true. This gave pragmatism as a method a good deal more latitude than Peirce intended for it, but this latitude was eventually reinforced by Dewey when he further revised the pragmatic test or rule as the attempt to determine the meaning of anything in terms of both the probable, as opposed to merely verifiable, causes from which it emerged and the potential, as opposed to inevitable or predictable, consequences in which it may result.

As a theory of truth, on the other hand, pragmatism was identified by James with the view that the true is less an inherent property of ideas than a property of their working relationship with those things which we already hold to be true. By truth, then, James referred to something that helps us get in better touch with other parts of our experience. What James meant by this was simply that truth is cumulative and also conservative. We can only accept as new truths those ideas that are somehow understood to extend or complement, even as they also modify, what we had already accepted as true.

Since these convictions about truth and the procedures for ascertaining it carried with them a number of implications for understanding experience in general, pragmatism quickly developed for James and also for Dewey (and later for many others both in this country and abroad) into a more generalized perspective on life itself. Nor was this all. As pragmatism acquired this larger sense of itself as a general perspective, it also became in time, and especially as a result of transnational, really international, re-expressions, more pluralized, such that it would now be more accurate to speak of pragmatisms rather than pragmatism.

How would you characterize this looser, more expansive view of pragmatism as a perspective or orientation?

As a more general perspective on things, pragmatism has almost always entailed, whether for James and Dewey or for some of its European exponents like Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu, a belief that experience is always on-going, open-ended, and unfinished, that it will never be complete until the last person has her or his say. It has also presumed

that experience is inevitably plural, confusing, unpredictable, contradictory, contrary, and (an especially important attribute for James) vague.

A pragmatic outlook or perspective also acknowledges that if truth is always partially hostage to the past, to the assemblage of things already accepted as true, then thought never starts from a position of complete neutrality and can never yield conclusions that are completely objective. Such terms as “neutrality” and “objectivity” when applied to thought processes possess at best only a relative kind of credibility. Just as there are no uncontestably stable foundations for thinking, so there are no absolute guarantees for certainty in our conclusions. Thinking is a reflective process that is best described for the pragmatist as tentative, provisional, improvisatory, experimental, even hypothetical, and always open to self-correction and revision, and is directed less at discovering final solutions than at posing questions, sorting out issues, and assessing alternatives. As Dewey stated, what life presents us with is not a hierarchy of answers but a hierarchy of problems. The challenge for the pragmatist, then, is not to resolve doubt but to figure out, case by case and moment by moment, what is the better option to select, what is the better life to be led.

So, in its resistance to foundationalism, its openness to new experience, its belief that thought is never complete and must always be corrected, and its emphasis on the concrete and the ordinary, pragmatism quickly became much more than just a theory of truth and an intellectual method. It became a way of thinking and not just a system of thought, a mode of intellectually relating oneself to life as a whole.

Are you saying that pragmatism is a way of life?

That would be going too far, I think, though at the time he died, James was working on a full-blown metaphysics, the outlines of which were apparent in his theory of radical empiricism, and Dewey was always convinced that pragmatism led directly to democracy which he, indeed, did construe as a way of life. To put this another way, Dewey viewed pragmatism democratically, as a technique for enhancing our shared life with others by encouraging us to cooperate with them in the common task of testing hypotheses about experience against experience

itself, not just for the sake of overcoming obstacles and smoothing out difficulties but also for the sake of enriching the qualities of life as such.

What do you find most compelling about pragmatism?

This is a tough question, but I guess my answer would lie in several features of what I just called its general orientation. As a general perspective on, or orientation toward, life, pragmatism shares with aspects of postmodernism, for example, the conviction that absolute certainty in thought is almost always out of reach. It moreover believes, again with aspects of postmodernism, that the philosophical “quest for certainty,” as Dewey termed it, must be replaced, or at the very least complemented, by something like an aesthetic reconceptualization of experience as a form of art and the moral reformulation of the purpose of art as life’s continuous reevaluation of itself.

At the same time, however, pragmatism is very clear that we can develop or attain varying degrees of assurance about any number of things. Hence it neither asserts that the search for the truth is ultimately futile nor that all truths are relative and therefore, in effect, equal. If it insists that none of us possesses all of the truth all or perhaps even part of the time, it also assumes that the only way that we can correct our ideas about any truths is by referring those ideas back to experience itself.

Thus truth for pragmatism is always potentially social. Just as Peirce was looking originally for a test of truth that, in standing up to the laboratory’s requirements for exactitude, consistency, and coherence, would convince all investigators and not just one, so James and Dewey held that the search for the true is always a communal rather than an individual enterprise and that its value can only be established in relation to its impact on others.

You have suggested that pragmatism is “not so much an alternative to late modernist or postmodernist thinking as a useful intervention within it.” What do you mean by that?

What I mean is that though pragmatism shares postmodernism’s anti-foundationalism, it does not conclude that we thereby lack the means

to compare differing versions or assessments of experience. In other words, it doesn't reduce all of our negotiations with reality, as in at least some renderings of postmodernism, simply to a dispute between sentences or metaphors which are alleged to provide no basis for comparison. Through its reference to experience, and not just our experience but our attempts to understand the experience of others, it gives us ways to establish standards of evaluation that can be fairly widely shared and publicly warranted.

How would our society change if we employed pragmatism as our means of coming up with what we think is true, which values we should pursue, and how we should set goals for our culture?

I think we would be less confident about both our innocence and our righteousness. We would be more suspicious of our certitudes and less intolerant of difference. We would, in short, be far more attentive than we have ever been to the feelings and aspirations and convictions of other people in the world—not in the sense that we would necessarily wind up sharing those feelings and convictions, but rather in the sense that we would be in a somewhat better position both to understand them and to understand ourselves in relation to them. What pragmatism resists is any sort of presumption that truth or value resides within only one community of faith or practice. What it promotes, at least by implication, is the belief that the true and the good are most often the product of collaborative discoveries in which discussion, cooperation, negotiation, and even compromise among equals often plays a crucial part.

Pragmatism and Difference

Do you see a connection between pragmatism, multiculturalism, and difference?

One way of defining pragmatism is to call it a philosophy of difference, a philosophy, that is, designed to measure and assess the different kinds of difference that difference makes, whether this difference refers to distinctions of identity, statement, action, or principle. Such difference is of course the basic signature of a pluralistic world, but this does not

mean that pragmatism merely legitimates or replicates in its procedures the ideology of multiculturalism. From a pragmatic point of view, multiculturalism in America is in danger of foundering on the contradiction between, as David Hollinger has pointed out, its centrifugal pressures for cultural diversity and its centripetal pressures for some kind of shared sense of cultural identity. To me this means that we must rethink the meaning of multiculturalism in a way that fully takes account of what William James meant by “a certain blindness in human beings” (our inability to think our way into the feelings of other people) without succumbing to the belief that all our views of others are always already merely forms of ourselves.

Does pragmatism assume or hope that we will all end up with the same view of things?

Not at all. Dewey put it very well when he said that we must at least be tolerant of those who are not themselves intolerant, so any differences that are not inherently or declaredly destructive of human community can be refashioned to provide it with a stronger basis. But that basis will be found not in reconciling differences but in rendering them conversable and debatable.

In a recent issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, Rorty stated that “religion is something that the human species would be better if it could out-grow.” Religious difference is, in his view, not a helpful or useful difference. How does pragmatism as a method or a way of approaching differences help us with the very deep differences in the world today?

On this matter I find myself seriously at odds with Rorty. As Isaiah Berlin noted long ago, it is one thing to decry religious authoritarianism or lament the effects of fundamentalist thinking on moral practice, but it is quite another to appreciate the deep, incurable metaphysical need that so many people in the world still possess, and not without reason, for greater moral and spiritual support. In addition, there is an enormous distinction to be made between those religions that think they can provide us with absolute certainty in the face of the world’s confusion and evil and those which seek instead to provide us with moral guidance and support in the face of the world’s uncertainty.

A distinction that often accounts for those religions, or traditions within them, which seek to command and rule as opposed to those which seek to console and reform, it also helps illumine the relation between religion and violence. Those religious traditions which seek to command and rule tend to turn the religiously and culturally different into the absolutely other and thus resort to the ancient religious practice known as scapegoating, where people seek to cleanse themselves ritually by projecting onto others the burdens of their own undesired fears and pollution. Those traditions dedicated, on the other hand, to consolation and reform try to reverse, or at least counter, these processes by conceiving of the absolutely other on the contrary as simply the radically different and then employ another venerable religious practice which views the different not as opposites but rather as mirrors or, better, prisms which can refract back to the self undetected aspects of itself.

Pragmatism thus furnishes us not one but two ways of approaching the deep differences at work in the world today. Negatively, pragmatism presents itself as a cautionary philosophy that seeks to warn us against the evils of absolutism and particularly the “dogmatization of difference,” as the political philosopher William E. Connolly calls it, and the deprecation of the different which absolutism breeds. More positively, pragmatism offers us the record of its own genesis as a philosophy initially developed by James as a method for settling otherwise interminable ideological and metaphysical disputes and raises the question about whether it still might be employed—as, in actual fact, it is being informally employed throughout the world—to sort out and assess the comparative moral and religious merits of different perspectives—James called them “world-formulas”—in the new globalized world in which we now find ourselves.

Richard Rorty and Pragmatism

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Rorty’s pragmatism?

Rorty possesses an exceptionally acute eye for many of the right issues—the tyrannies of Enlightenment reason, the hazards of liberalism, the political centrality of solidarity, the emergence of a new kind of moral

writing devoted to edification as much as to critique—and exhibits an enviable ability to develop these issues in arresting language. He has never lacked for courage in raising questions that others have ducked, and he is prepared to embrace allies wherever he finds them. By the same token he has sometimes revealed a tendency to pose these issues in overly simple, oppositional terms that are intended to make his opponent's arguments look bad and his own look good. At his best, Rorty has lent pragmatism a more contemporary look by associating it with concerns and motifs that are postmodernist and poststructuralist, or what he calls textualist. At his worst, he has conflated the history of pragmatism itself with a coming-of-age narrative whose liberal project to de-divinize the world is but the obverse side of its tendency to reduce all intellectual inquiry to a question of personal advantage.

At bottom these difficulties derive from the overly sharp philosophical distinction that Rorty wants to draw between those languages we use to describe what is good for ourselves and those languages we use to describe what is good for others. On his reading of the history of Western philosophy, the gap between these languages is simply unbridgeable.

The public/private distinction?

Right. Rorty views private narcissism and public responsibility as irreconcilable, but this is to forget that if our private lives are not dependent on our public lives with others, then we would have no way of explaining either why we should want to change ourselves or why we should be concerned for others. Rorty is rightly in favor of both, but he does not think we can supply any philosophical rationale for what the one has to do with the other. In this case, the fact that we support both is simply a matter of personal prejudice, albeit a commendable one.

But this is to overlook the fact that there are other communities—the African American community is one—where the languages of public accountability have not been sequestered philosophically from the languages of personal self-recreation. Like many American academics, Rorty has failed to see that African American intellectuals have done most of their best thinking about such matters not in the realm of pro-

fessional philosophy or Grand Theory but in the more public world of letters and political thought.

Does Pragmatism Work When the Stakes Are High?

While pragmatism may be a helpful procedure or way of talking about things in our everyday lives or experiences, some argue that it lacks a certain motivating force when we get into extreme situations. How would you defend pragmatism's ability to provide us with reasons to fight injustice or pursue the good when the stakes are high?

I'm not sure that any defense is needed; or, to put it differently, I don't think that such arguments are really justified. James defied public opinion by taking dead aim at American imperialism in the Spanish-American War. Dewey weighed in for well over a half a century against social injustices wherever he could find them. And Rorty has gone on record as saying that nothing is more important than fighting cruelty and preventing humiliation. But if these examples are not by themselves sufficient to prove that pragmatism possesses a political consciousness, let me add that a philosophy devoted to translating questions of meaning and truth into questions of practice and to redirecting all forms of inquiry away from what James called "first principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" and "towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power" is not a philosophy inclined to take lightly the challenges of extreme situations.

Such arguments are not, however, altogether unexpected, given the influence of various neopragmatists like Stanley Fish and Walter Benn Michaels who, not without Rorty's own support, tend to view culture as an intertextual system of signs capable of infinite redescription. Pragmatism then becomes the name of a theory, as Michaels and Stephen Knapp state in their essay "Against Theory," that is no theory at all but rather a practice critical of all other practices that resort to theory for the sake of governing practice from a position mistakenly assumed to operate outside of it. In such a world, shorn of any ontological or epistemological supports, language, rhetoric, and symbols go

all the way down, and the stakes themselves are simply, as the saying goes, a matter of interpretation.

Many of the ideals held in the past several centuries were founded on metaphysical ideas, systems, and understandings now in question, and without which it was feared, there would be no basis for upholding the ideals. Does pragmatism give us the ability to uphold those ideals because of its relatedness to our experience and because something in our experience tells us these ideals are worth fighting for?

It is worth remembering that pragmatism was itself born out of the erosion of a religious world view once sedimented in different ways in the early lives of James and Dewey, and its emergence as a philosophy was thus in large part motivated by the conviction that the intellectual energies released as a result might help us rethink the meaning of the legacy of those more antiquated systems in a secular, or at least less conventionally orthodox, age. That said, it is clear that pragmatism is only one of many recuperative strategies which may be able to assist us in retrieving those ideals once locked in inherited traditions which still contain unspent potential that may help guide us through this difficult, terribly dangerous moment for the world.

While Rorty argues that cruelty is the worst thing one person can do to another, and that we need to expand our sense of “we” in order to combat cruelty, he also says that we have no reason or foundation or basis by which to tell a torturer that what he is doing is wrong.

Rorty is simply trying to be consistent, and philosophers have always made a virtue of consistency. If there are no foundations for thought, then there can be no rational basis for values, which turns values, Rorty reasons, into prejudices that are merely, after all, matters of taste. All of this was said earlier by Dewey, but Dewey was scarcely disheartened by the discovery. If everything is merely a matter of taste, he reasoned, then philosophy should be redefined as a critique of prejudices in which part of the challenge is to determine which are the more constructive, which the most destructive. Needless to say, Dewey would have had no more trouble than Rorty in deciding where torture falls on that scale, but he would also have been less troubled about why he felt that way.

For the rest of us, however, I suspect that consistency is less a virtue than a kind of expediency, and no doubt an important one until it conflicts with our deepest sense of ourselves and our relation to others, whereupon we side with Walt Whitman who silenced most misgivings about inconsistency by declaring that if he contradicted himself, so much the worse for consistency because he was, he believed, large, and, like the rest of us, contained multitudes.

Pragmatism and the Aesthetic

How does the aesthetic relate to pragmatism?

Pragmatism has always made a great deal of the aesthetic. Rorty has said this most clearly in recent years by noting that one of Dewey's greatest contributions to modern philosophy was his attempt to try to reground philosophical discourse not in terms of the scientific but in terms of the aesthetic. The great text was of course *Art as Experience* where Dewey argued that all experience is art in potential and the purpose of all art is to criticize the actual in light of the possible.

But pragmatism's affirmation of the aesthetic is so strong that it actually reinstalls the imaginative at the center of its notion of cognition and thus challenges the classic Enlightenment notion of reason as purely analytic. One sees this most vividly in James' theory of the pragmatic method which identifies the meaning of ideas not only with outcomes and consequences but with outcomes and consequences many of whom cannot be verified and confirmed before we must act on them. For the most part we act not on the basis of confirmed facts but on the basis of surmises and conjectures. Thus, for James the imagination assumed a role in the operations of the intellect that was central because so much of the life of the mind is devoted to determinations whose results we can never substantiate in advance but can only guess at or speculate before we have to respond to them. But if thinking pragmatically is therefore as dependent on techniques of conjecture, surmise, intuition, and good guessing as it is on procedures of logic and deduction, then the rational properly conceived is not the enemy of the aesthetic but its

ally, and all serious processes of reflection have a place, or at any rate a need, for the projective capacities of the poetic.

Is There Truth in Pragmatism?

Some argue that the notion of truth is unimportant to the pragmatist. What does it mean for something to be true in pragmatism?

Pragmatism has gotten bad press about its views on truth, though some of the responsibility for this lies with James himself, and particularly with some of his formulations in his book *Pragmatism*, which forced him to publish another book immediately thereafter to explain himself called *The Meaning of Truth*.

Pragmatism, as I said before, views truth in relational rather than substantive terms, as a working notion rather than as an inherited or self-evident norm. Truth represents a triangulated relationship between what has heretofore been accepted as true, what we now think might be true instead, and what we know or believe we have fathomed about the external world to which any notions of truth, old or new, must be applied. While it would be comforting to think that truth is one and unchanging, the pragmatist in most of us believes otherwise. What most of us know is that change is relentless and unpredictable and that, as a result, the fund of old truths, like our quiver of new truths, must be constantly tested and re-tested against the always unstable, ever-fluid field of experience itself.

So truth isn't relativistic in the sense that one thing can't be judged as truer than another? Rather, pragmatism emphasizes the changing nature of our understanding of the world and ourselves?

I think that's right. If truth is relative, this is not because all truths add up to the same thing but rather because all truths are related to the circumstances in which they arose and to which they apply.

In pragmatism is there the possibility of affirming or proclaiming universal values or universal truths?

Yes, but with a proviso. Pragmatism can easily concede that certain truths have held up over very long periods of time and been broadly supported and believed. At the same time it must acknowledge that few truths have lasted forever or gained assent from everyone. In this sense, “universality” is itself a relative term. But the point is not that particular truths have not been widely shared, for they most certainly have; the point is rather how to protect those same truths from becoming totalizing, absolutist, totalitarian. The real issue is not only to defend truth from its detractors but also to prevent truth from becoming fixed and dictatorial in the hands of its supporters.

So we might be able to work for the acceptance of human rights or the sacredness of each human individual as a universal value, but without claiming a certain metaphysical foundation for that?

Even if I thought that we possessed a metaphysical foundation for these values, I don't believe that either of them require its support for their legitimacy. They square with enough of the general wisdom of humankind to justify our allegiance and our advocacy. But there is a difficulty that attends the claim that these values are, as you describe them, “universal.” Does this mean that they are self-evident to all people? That surely is not the case. Does this mean that all people everywhere interpret them in the same way? That, too, is surely not the case. Does this mean that their recognition is based on some common traits that all people share? That, too, is likely to be disputed. If human rights are construed rather differently, for example, in the East, the Middle East, and the West, if different moral and religious traditions place different values on human life, where does the term “universal” take us?

Perhaps it is enough to say that while the universality of such values is deeply contested around the world, the disputes they attract nonetheless attest to the enormous stakes all of us everywhere have in their interpretation. While we clearly need to find better ways of saying what we mean by such values, we still more urgently need to find better ways of safeguarding what they variously represent to people throughout the world. One of the central intellectual tasks of the twenty-first century will be to devise strategies for addressing both issues in a less essentialist or exceptionalist, and a more pragmatic, manner.