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Five Answers on Pragmatism*

Susan Haack**

Professor of Law & Professor of Philosophy- University of Miami-USA

Abstract

Prof. Haack answers a series of questions on pragmatism, beginning with the origins of this tradition in the work of Peirce and James, its evolution in the work of Dewey and Mead, and its influence beyond the United States in, for example, the Italian pragmatists and the radical British pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller. Classical pragmatism, she observes, is a rich and varied tradition from which there is still much to be learned—as the many ways her own work in logic, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, and philosophy of law has been informed by the old pragmatists testify. Of late, however, this tradition has been misunderstood, impoverished, and vulgarized by self-styled neo-pragmatists; here, Haack turns her attention specifically to the conception of pragmatism as essentially a political philosophy, and the near-vacuous equation of pragmatism with “problem-solving.”

Key words: pragmatism; C. S. Peirce; William James; John Dewey; Richard Rorty; truth; politics.

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** E-mail: shaack@law.miami.edu

...philosophy, where partisanship is treason ...
George Santayana¹

Introduction

I wrote this paper in 2009 at the invitation of the editor of a volume to be entitled *Five Questions on Pragmatism*; but had to set it aside when the editor simply stopped communicating with contributors and, apparently, abandoned the project. The questions to which this editor asked me to respond presupposed serious, but very common, misconceptions of pragmatism, which I corrected; and asked about the influence of the pragmatist tradition on my own thinking, which I explained. So I am very happy to see this paper finally appear in print.

1. Pragmatism is a notoriously contested intellectual tradition. What do you see as its characteristic features?

“A notoriously contested tradition”?—a fair enough description, I suppose, so far as it goes; but it is too simple to be really satisfying. As long ago as 1907, William James observed that “the tower of Babel was monotony in comparison” to the confusions over pragmatism. “[T]he upshot has made one despair of man’s intelligence,” he continued; but, he hoped, “little by little the mud will settle to the bottom.”² He was too optimistic. By now the confusions are even worse, and the water is even muddier than it was a century ago.

C. S. Peirce first presented what would later be called the Pragmatic Maxim of meaning in 1878, in a “little paper expressing some of the opinions I had been urging under the name of pragmatism” at the Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, Mass., in the early 1870s: “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.”³ James acknowledged that the word “pragmatism” was Peirce’s; but Peirce himself—apparently fearing that the meaning of the word in its new, philosophical use would be confused with its then-current meaning in ordinary, non-philosophical English, “officious meddlesomeness”—didn’t use it in print until after James had already made it famous.⁴ So when I write of “classical pragmatism” I will refer to the philosophical tradition that grew out of Peirce’s and James’s discussions at the Metaphysical Club; and, like most scholars, I will include the jurisprudence of Oliver Wendell Holmes as well as the philosophical work of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead under this rubric.

Albeit in somewhat different ways, both Peirce and James conceived of pragmatism as reformist in tendency, as aspiring to revitalize and renew philosophy. And, as James insisted, pragmatism had “no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method” (1907a, 32): i.e., the method expressed in the

Pragmatic Maxim. All the classical pragmatists shared a fallibilistic stance, a profound distaste for false dichotomies, an aspiration to accommodate the best of the older philosophies while avoiding textbook “isms,” a naturalistic disinclination to philosophize in a purely a priori way, and a willingness to take the idea of evolution seriously; but there was never what one could properly describe as a body of characteristically pragmatist theses.

One of James’s Italian admirers, Giovanni Papini, put it well: pragmatism was like “a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith; in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. ... They all own the corridor, and must pass through it.”⁵ As this observation of Papini’s makes clear, the old pragmatist tradition accommodated not only a vast range of philosophical interests, but also a considerable divergence of philosophical views.

Peirce was trained as a chemist, and for much of his life was a working scientist; as a young man he had thoroughly steeped himself in Kant’s philosophy; and his philosophical writings focused primarily on logic, semeiotics, metaphysics, theory of inquiry, and philosophy of science. At his father’s insistence, James had been trained in medicine; he described himself as a follower of John Stuart Mill and, unlike Peirce, thought philosophy would do better to go round Kant than through him; and his philosophical writings were most centrally concerned with philosophy of psychology, philosophy of religion, metaphysics, ethics, and education. Early on, Dewey had been a devoted follower of Hegel; and in the course of his long career his work ranged over virtually every field of philosophy, from metaphysics, logic, and theory of inquiry to philosophy of education, social and political philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics. Mead, now recognized as one of the founders of social psychology, was primarily concerned to develop an understanding of the evolutionary, and the social, roots of language and mind. Holmes, who had been a founding, though not a longstanding, member of the Metaphysical Club, and who would later become a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, contributed a recognizably pragmatist approach to “the path of the law” and its place on the map of the history of human social development.

Moreover, besides the differences just noted, from the very beginning there was a divergence between Peirce’s and James’s interpretations of the Pragmatic Maxim, a divergence that became more marked as Peirce’s realism gradually developed into its mature form. Peirce presents “pragmatism” as deriving from Kant’s “*pragmatische*,” the experiential; and his statements of the maxim tie meaning to the experiential

consequences of a concept's applying. James, by contrast, stresses the etymological connection of "pragmatism" with the Greek, "*praxis*," action; and his statements of the maxim tie meaning to the practical consequences of belief. Again, while there are recognizable continuities linking Peirce's, James's, and Dewey's accounts, there are also very significant differences between Peirce's ideal-realist conception of truth as the final opinion that would be agreed were inquiry to continue indefinitely, James's more nominalist equation of truth and verifiability, and Dewey's instrumentalist stress on the "tried and true." Peirce was far from sympathetic to James's doctrine of the "Will to Believe"—writing rather pointedly, the year after James's book was published, of the "Will to Learn" (5.583, 1898); and evidently he regarded Dewey's conception of reality as too radical: "there are certain mummified pedants who have never waked to the truth that the act of knowing a real object alters it. They are curious specimens of humanity, and ... I am one of them" (5.555, c.1903). Dewey's account of the "Construction of Good" shifts from James's emphasis on what is actually desired to a new focus on what is really desirable. And so on.

So perhaps it is no wonder that, as time has passed, there has been an ever-increasing fragmentation of pragmatism; and not simply, as some commentators suggest, into more Peircean, realist, and more Jamesian, nominalist wings, but into a whole wide range of intermediate and mixed positions. To make matters even more complicated, sometimes this or that view is characterized as "pragmatist" because it is informed by ideas taken from one or another of the classical pragmatists—Dewey's political philosophy, perhaps, or James's pluralism—when not all the old pragmatists accepted these ideas. And, of course, there are many who simply confuse "pragmatism" in its specialized philosophical sense with "pragmatism" as it is now commonly understood in ordinary English, as connoting concern for practical expediency rather than principle.

As long ago as 1905, despairing of the "merciless abuse" the word "pragmatism" was suffering in the literary journals, Peirce had introduced "pragmaticism" for his specific version of the approach—famously hoping aloud that this word would be "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" (5.414, 1905). And so it has proved. But the abuse of the word "pragmatism" has continued unabated, as not only literary theorists but also legal scholars, and many others, have adopted it. Not, of course, that all the kidnappers have been from outside philosophy; far from it. Already in the early decades of the twentieth century, F. C. S. Schiller had proposed an overtly relativist, "humanist" approach that James aptly described as the "butt-end foremost" representative of pragmatism. And in our times Richard Rorty—in whose hands the reformist spirit of classical

pragmatism was transmuted into a vaguely postmodernist, revolutionary neo-pragmatism (or neo-“pragmatism”) which repudiates the most central philosophical projects outright—has out-Schillered Schiller.

“Every man is fully convinced that there is such a thing as truth,” Peirce had written, “or he would not ask any question.” Truth, he continued, “consists in a conformity to something *independent of his thinking it to be so*, or of any man’s opinion upon that subject” (5.211, 1903). Summarily dismissing such foolishness, Rorty boasts that *he* does “not have much use for such notions as ‘objective truth’” (1992, 141). In *Evidence and Inquiry*, I labeled Rorty’s far-from-edifying picture “Vulgar Pragmatism”; and noted that, while Rorty was up to his pseudo-literary anti-philosophical mischief, Stephen Stich and Paul Churchland were touting other, scientific styles of vulgar-pragmatist radicalism. And by now, naturally, one quite often hears this or that variant of Vulgar Rortyism described as “pragmatism.”

Shortly after Rorty’s death, I was invited to contribute to a philosophical journal running a special issue on pragmatism—potentially a hot topic, the letter of invitation intimated, as “this watershed might ... signal a chance to creatively re-appropriate the pragmatic tradition” And well before this there were already indications that certain elements in the neo-analytic party in philosophy—by now showing signs of intellectual exhaustion, but still dominant in the profession—were hoping to kidnap the word “pragmatism” for their own projects. But perhaps this story belongs under the next question.

2. What initially prompted your own intellectual engagement with pragmatism? What do you consider the most important influence pragmatism has had on your own discipline specifically, and on contemporary intellectual debates more generally?

My “intellectual engagement with pragmatism” began long enough ago that it’s hard to recollect in detail. But, as best I can recall, the story goes roughly like this. As it now seems to me, when I was writing *Deviant Logic* I thought of pragmatism in something of the same casual way as Quine. But at some point in the mid-1970s, the rather dismissive comments on Peirce’s account of truth in the first chapter of Quine’s *Word and Object* prompted me to go get Peirce’s *Collected Papers* and start reading seriously. (Many years later I discovered that my reaction was much like Arthur Bentley’s when he read the first two volumes of the *Collected Papers*: “I have had one of the excitements of my life reading Peirce the last six weeks or so.”)⁶ In due course I began to read James and Dewey, and later Mead.

Then in the 1980s and 90s, as my interests took an epistemological turn and I was confronted by his repudiation of the legitimacy of the entire epistemological project, I found myself “engaged”—that is to say, wrestling—with Rorty. And later, as I thought about how crucial the objectivity of standards of better and worse evidence is to the legitimacy of any justice system, and realized how much the law depends on epistemological assumptions, I discovered an interest in legal philosophy that has led to what I expect to be a long-standing intellectual engagement with Holmes’s jurisprudence.

The effects can be seen not only in those parts of my work that might be classified as “pragmatist scholarship,” but almost everywhere. Briefly and roughly: in *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993), I took a recognizably pragmatist approach as I developed a thoroughly fallibilistic, modestly naturalistic epistemology capable of overcoming the false dichotomies that had by then taken firm root in analytic epistemology: foundationalism versus coherentism, internalism versus externalism, the logical versus the causal, apriorism versus scientism, etc.. I also (I believe) demolished the vulgar pragmatists’ arguments—contextualist/conventionalist arguments in the case of Rorty, scientific arguments in the case of Stich and the Churchlands—against the legitimacy of epistemology; and pointed out how radically at odds their “pragmatism” was with the classical tradition.

In *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (1998) I developed Peircean ideas about how genuine inquiry, the real thing, differs from the sham and the fake, and used them to get a grip on the perverse incentives now ubiquitous in the academy. I also went several more rounds with Rorty, culminating in the “conversation” I compiled, using their own words, between him and Peirce – a conversation that has since been performed, with my participation, both in English and in Spanish.

Defending Science—Within Reason (2003) opens with a quotation from James, and is informed throughout by the spirit of what Peirce called “synechism,” the methodological principle that one should look for continuities rather than sharp dichotomies. This book develops an insight to be found in Dewey as well as in Thomas Huxley, Percy Bridgman, and Albert Einstein: that scientific inquiry is continuous with, but amplifies and refines, the procedures of everyday empirical inquiry. Moreover, my stress on the enrichment of scientific vocabulary—which, far from being an impediment to rationality, is an important contribution to progress—can be traced to Peirce’s ideas about the growth of meaning; and my conception of kinds, natural and social, is also Peircean at heart.

Putting Philosophy to Work (2008) includes an essay on what synechism is, how it plays out in Peirce’s metaphysics, and how it has influenced my own work. No less importantly, this book is informed

throughout by a conviction learned from the old pragmatists: that while philosophy should of course aspire to rigor and clarity, it is no less vital that, rather than falling into nit-picking, it engage with issues of enduring human concern. And my growing self-consciousness about the importance of philosophical style bears witness to my appreciation—all the warmer now, given the increasingly stilted and self-importantly technical manners of the neo-analytic party—for the flashes of wit in Peirce's writing, and the delightful humanity of James's.

Most recently, a series of my papers testifies both to the influence of Holmes, and to the potential fruitfulness of applying the synechistic and evolutionary ideas of the older pragmatists to an understanding of legal systems and their development.

So by now it should come as no surprise that it strikes me as foolhardy even to try to identify "*the* most important" influence of pragmatism either on philosophy or on legal theory. Suffice it to say, first, that there is by now a very considerable body of scholarship on pragmatism; and, most to the present purpose, that there have been a number of significant philosophers on whom classical pragmatism has unmistakably had an influence: C. I. Lewis, Sidney Hook, Morton G. White, Nicholas Rescher, and Hilary Putnam, among others.⁷ And at present, certainly, some counterweight to what would otherwise be the near-hegemony of the increasingly hermetic and self-absorbed neo-analytic party in Anglo-American philosophy is urgently needed.

I should add, however, that this hermeticism may itself have been in part a reaction to Rorty's success. Alarm at Rorty's relativist excesses and defensiveness about the incursions of would-be philosophers from the literature departments seems to have led—not, as with the classical pragmatists, to a broader and deeper conception of the philosophical enterprise—but to a profound self-absorption. And, to the degree to which this hermeticism has taken hold in the profession, it has emboldened neo-analytic philosophers to aspire to colonize and domesticate previously outlaw territories. In consequence, we see new, blandly analytic styles of feminist philosophy, social epistemology, etc.; and, most to the present purpose, the kidnapping of the word "pragmatism" for projects in the pragmatics of language—as with Robert Brandom's "analytic pragmatism," premised on an idea of meaning-as-use and a Rorty-esque conception of justification-as-social-practice. Though Brandom occasionally alludes to Dewey,⁸ insofar as I understand this very confusingly expressed congeries of ideas, it seems to have no deep affinity with classical pragmatism, but to be better described as neo-later-Wittgensteinianism.

In the legal academy, as in mainstream philosophy, it is sometimes said that we are witnessing a “renaissance” of pragmatism; but here too readers familiar with the classical tradition are likely to be puzzled about what this is a renaissance *of*, exactly; for the uses and misuses of “pragmatism” in recent legal thinking are at least as formidably tangled as the uses and misuses of “pragmatism” in recent philosophy. Most startling of all, perhaps, is how often the most salient characteristic of legal pragmatism is taken to be distaste for theory: a truly remarkable reversal of Holmes’s insistence that “we have too little theory in the law rather than too much” (1896, p.404).

3. Among the issues that divide contemporary pragmatists is whether pragmatism as a philosophical position has political consequences. What are the political consequences, if any, of pragmatism?

Unlike Dewey’s, Peirce’s writings are pretty much free of politics; but, for the record, here are some lines he wrote in 1893:

The Reign of Terror was very bad; but now the Gradgrind banner has been this century long flaunting in the face of heaven, with an insolence to provoke the very skies to scowl and rumble. Soon a flash and quick peal will shake economists quite out of their complacency, too late. The twentieth century, in its second half, shall surely see the deluge-tempest burst upon the social order—to clear upon a world as deep in ruin as that greed-philosophy has long plunged it into guilt. No post-thermidorian high jinks then! (6.292, 1893)

Obviously, though, it would be far-fetched, to put it mildly, to suggest that this extraordinary prescience was somehow a consequence of Peirce’s pragmatism; it is, rather, a testament to Peirce’s penetrating intelligence. Indeed—since, as I have said, pragmatism is best thought of, not as requiring these or those articles of faith, but simply as a broad congeries of philosophical attitudes—it would be very surprising if it *did* have substantive political consequences.

To be sure, unlike Peirce, Dewey not only developed an articulate political philosophy, but was also actively engaged in the politics of his day. And there are, certainly, some affinities between Dewey’s fallibilism and the gradualism of his political philosophy, and between his awareness of social aspects of inquiry and his commitment to a robust democracy. But the idea that this means that pragmatism has “political consequences” is tenuous at best.

There are those, apparently, who think Rorty’s philosophy helpful on political questions. I couldn’t agree less. Playing fast and loose with the

concept of truth as Rorty does might, I suppose, enable political *success*, in the most vulgar sense of that phrase, and thus have “political consequences”; but it is surely a positive hindrance to genuine political *progress*. For, as both Dewey and Peirce observed, to devise reasonable policies for improving society it is necessary to know how things presently are, how we would prefer them to be, and what might get us from here to there; but if Rorty were right, if the ideas of objectively better and worse evidence, objective truth, knowledge, the way the world is, etc. were simply non-viable, such policies would be impossible.

And now there are those who suggest that “pragmatism” mandates this or that position on some current political issue or controversy⁹. Sometimes, it seems, this is simply a confusion of the philosophical with the ordinary-language meaning of “pragmatism.” Sometimes, again, it seems to be based on an appeal to *Dewey’s* political ideas, or to his political activities—potentially a rash extrapolation, given how very different the world is now than it was in his time. And sometimes, perhaps, it simply exploits the fact that, in today’s academy, the line between political expression and academic work has blurred—a phenomenon I find quite disturbing.

4. Pragmatism often is portrayed not only as a narrowly philosophical tradition but as a distinctively American one. Do you think it is “exportable”? Do you see any particular obstacles, limits, or perils, as pragmatism “travels” not just from philosophy to other disciplines, but to the world outside the academy, or from its native intellectual milieu to other parts of the world?

Yes, pragmatism is a philosophical tradition native to the United States, in fact, the *only* such philosophical tradition thus far. But, to begin with, classical pragmatism was never a *narrowly* philosophical tradition. On the contrary: one of the virtues of the classical pragmatists was precisely their willingness, and their competence, to engage with social, cultural, scientific, etc., issues beyond the narrowly philosophical. To see this, one has only to think of the relevance of Peirce’s metaphysics to cosmology, or of his and James’s philosophies of mind to psychology, of Dewey’s enormously influential philosophy of education, or of Mead’s role in the then-new discipline of social psychology—to list just a few examples among many. I can testify from my own experience of speaking about pragmatism to audiences in law, in economics, and in the social sciences generally that practitioners of other disciplines still find the classical pragmatist tradition useful today: the “institutional economists” who look to Dewey’s social philosophy, for example, and the legal theorists who appeal to Peirce’s account of abduction. And then there are the

semioticians who acknowledge Peirce as a founding father of their discipline, the literary theorists focused on the relation of the reader and the text who look to Dewey's interactionism, the "symbolic interactionists" in social science who look to Mead, and so on.

Philosophical traditions *are* traditions, and all, no doubt, bear some marks of the cultural milieu in which they arose; nevertheless, at its heart philosophy aspires to universality. And from the very early days the influence of pragmatism extended far beyond the United States. To see this, one has only to think of the influence of Peirce on F. P. Ramsey, or of James on Wittgenstein, of the (vaguely) Jamesian pragmatism that flourished in Italy, or of the enormous influence of Dewey's philosophy in China.¹⁰ (But we shouldn't forget that it was Schiller's proto-vulgar-pragmatism, along with Mussolini's somewhat embarrassing enthusiasm for what he (mis-)understood of James's philosophy, that convinced Bertrand Russell that pragmatism was an "engineers' philosophy," bound to lead to cosmic impiety, or at any rate to fascism.)¹¹ The influence of pragmatism in Europe remains today, in the work of philosophers like Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Umberto Eco; recent past presidents of the C.S. Peirce Society have come from France, Brazil, and Spain; articles in a recent issue of *Anuario Filosófico* devoted to pragmatism in the Hispanic world trace pragmatist influences to be found in the work of significant philosophers from Spain, Argentina, and Venezuela.

My own experience testifies to the continuing influence of pragmatism in many parts of the world. That "conversation" between Peirce and Rorty has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, and Chinese; Prof. Chen and I recently edited an anthology of pragmatist writings published by the People's University Press in Beijing, and I have been interviewed by Chinese scholars on issues about pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. In just the last few years I have lectured on pragmatist themes in Germany, Spain, the U.K., Poland, and Chile, published on pragmatist ideas in Argentina, Brazil, China, Italy, Mexico, Norway, and Poland, and joined the editorial board of a new European journal devoted to pragmatism. In short, so far as I can judge, though Mead seems still to be somewhat neglected, the influence of Peirce, of James, and of Dewey seems, if anything, to be growing.

5. Pragmatism commonly is characterized as problem-solving. What sorts of problem—in the academy or beyond—do you think contemporary pragmatism might usefully address?

The philosophers of the classical pragmatist tradition tackled *philosophical* problems in ways from which there is still much to be

learned. Beyond this, I'm not quite sure what to make of this curious question. If it is an allusion to Dewey's discussion of the transformation of problematic situations into non-problematic ones, I can only say that now is not the time, nor this the place, to get to grips with this scholarly issue. If it is an allusion to Hook's description of naturalism as "systematic reflection on, and elaboration of, the procedures man employs in the successful resolution of the problems and difficulties of human experience," I can only say that I have already indicated my agreement with a conception of scientific inquiry as refining and amplifying the methods of everyday empirical inquiry. But if it is intended, as I suspect it is, to identify pragmatism, in line with the previous question, with *political* problem-solving, I have to say that it strikes me as potentially dangerous. For solving problems sounds like such an undeniably Good Thing—who could possibly be against it?—and yet what counts as a solution is left entirely open. But there is all the difference in the world between, say, solving the problem of famine in Africa by encouraging stable, democratic governments, land reform, improved strains of seed, or micro-grants to small farmers, and solving it by nuking the continent.

I would approach the question of the usefulness of pragmatism from a quite different angle, and in a quite different spirit, the spirit of my opening quotation from Santayana—deliberately avoiding any suggestion that we think of pragmatism as a party one must either join or oppose, or as a brand one might "export." In brief: I see the classical pragmatist tradition, both in philosophy and in legal theory, as an extraordinarily fertile one, and moreover, as in some ways ahead not only of its own time but also of ours. It is high time to focus less on squabbling over who owns its legacy, and more on exploring the wealth of insight that classical pragmatism bequeathed us.¹²

Notes:

1. Santayana (1905), vol. 1, 110, from a description of Berkeley as "a party man in philosophy."
2. From James's interview with Edwin Bjorkman in the *New York Times*, listed in the bibliography as James (1907b).
3. "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" appears in Peirce (CP) 5.388-410 (1878). (Don't be misled by the fact that the section headings in this paper use the word "pragmatism"; these were supplied by the editors, not by Peirce.) Peirce's later description of this paper is at 5.13 (c.1906).
4. Peirce (CP) 5.13 (c.1899); James (1898).
5. As reported in James (1907a), 32.
6. Arthur Bentley to John Dewey, June 14th, 1939, in Ratner and Altman (1964), p.72 (The first two volumes of CP appeared in 1938).

7. I have not included Quine, whose acknowledgments of pragmatism seems quite perfunctory: compare his “Epistemology Naturalized” with Hook’s “Naturalism and First Principles,” for example, or his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” with White’s “The Analytic and the Synthetic: An Untenable Dualism.”
8. I note that none of Brandom’s allusions to Dewey is anchored by a specific reference; and that he makes only one casual reference to James, and none to Peirce or Mead.
9. See e.g., the curious mixture of material to be found at <http://www.obamaspragmatism.info/L&S/htm..>
10. The flyer for Egan and Chu (2009), for example, told me that Hu Shi, president of Peking University from 1946-1948, had studied pragmatism with Dewey at Columbia.
11. These observations come from Russell (1946), p.782.
12. My thanks to Mark Migotti for helpful comments on a draft.

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