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International conference on William James and Pragmatism

12 – 13 November
University of Coimbra

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Working draft

Why we need both:
on the importance of assessing the relationship between Peirce's and James's pragmatism

Abstract

Charles S. Peirce and William James are considered the fathers of classical pragmatism. The former is credited as the one who invented the doctrine and the term, while the latter as the one who gave both a public baptism. Yet, their understandings of pragmatism were, at least, partially different, and this difference has been conceptualized by other scholars in different and even conflicting ways. In my paper I shall discuss three exemplar ways of conceiving the relationship between Peirce's and James's pragmatism. According to the first, the one of misreading, James simply misread Peirce's original formulation of pragmatism. According to the second, the one of extension, James made a more or less conscious extension of Peirce's pragmatism. According to the third, the one of brotherhood, the pragmatisms of Peirce and James had a common genealogical root but they eventually developed their own individuality. Through a chronological reconstruction of the key-steps of the evolution of pragmatism, I shall contend that the first of these options is wrong, both historically and theoretically; that the second one is historically imprecise but in a sense theoretically practicable; and that the third one is historically correct, though it requires further qualifications to become theoretically fruitful.

As William James tells us, pragmatism is nothing but *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Similarly, Peirce argues that «the rivulets at the head of the river of pragmatism are easily traced back to almost any desired antiquity» and that «any philosophical doctrine that should be completely new could hardly fail to prove completely false» (EP2: 399). Pragmatism, then, as one of the main strands of Western philosophical thought; as a general attitude or disposition which, like a karstic river, flew beneath the surface of the history of ideas and that, from time to time, has emerged in the works of Aristotle, Locke, Hume, Berkeley and many others. Remarkably, both Peirce and James identify Socrates as one of the earliest practitioners of the method while they exclude others like Plato, Descartes and Leibniz, that is, the exponents of the idealistic and rationalistic attitude in philosophy.

Noting that all the precursors of pragmatism saw their actions as re-actions against some established philosophical tradition, Sergio Franzese (2003) has argued that pragmatism is historically a subversive kind of thinking, in a way theoretically contiguous with Emerson's transcendentalism, for one becomes a pragmatist as one becomes a nietzschean or a deconstructionist, that is, in opposition to something else, usually a general, absolutist and foundational theoretical project or a particular set of metaphysical abstractions.

But this subversive part of the pragmatic attitude is just one of its distinguishing features. The other and most important face of the medal is the search for new solutions, new syntheses and new instruments to solve problems for which the current orthodoxy is unable to provide a satisfactory response. Hence, with Papini and Vailati, pragmatism is an instrument to «unstiffen» philosophical theories, but, at the same time, with Peirce, James and Dewey, it is a way to find new and more fruitful ways of coping with the world.

This twofold attitude emerged with clarity in the works of the members of the Cambridge Metaphysical Club. The Metaphysical Club is now acknowledged as the birthplace of classical pragmatism for it represented the *medium* through which a distinct set of readings, concepts, problems, methodologies, personalities, professional and theoretical interests have determined the emergence of a common 'operative strategy'. What the members of the Club became collectively aware of was that in philosophy as in legal theory or biology, what were required were not absolute results deduced from abstract principles, but new methodologies of inquiry. Although the roots of pragmatism were many and intertwined – including the awareness of the impact of Darwin's revolution, the Civil War, and a common admiration for the British tradition of thought – as Max Fisch (1986) has shown, it has been the systematic application of Bain's theory of belief, as «that upon which a man is prepared to act», what has imparted to all their works a unique and distinct theoretical blend.

Then, the first explicit statement of this operative strategy appeared in 1878 in an essay written by Peirce and entitled *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, where it received this famous formulation: «Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object» (EP1: 132). Twenty years later James referred to this rule as «the principle of pragmatism, the principle of Peirce» in a conference delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, and entitled *Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results*, giving thereby a public baptism to the term and to the conception.

From 1898 henceforth, the public success of 'pragmatism' had several effects. Retrospectively, it permitted to distinguish by abstraction something that already existed, but that,

since it had been an organic part of a larger whole, had never been named and isolated before. Prospectively, it determined the emergence of what Lovejoy (1863) has defined as an «intellectual flag», that is something that one might choose either to attack or to defend, but not to ignore. Furthermore, despite few idiosyncrasies, after this date Peirce and James began to provide a series of retrospective and substantially coherent narrations of the genealogy of pragmatism.

However, Peirce often remarked that James has transformed his original rule. In a paper published in 1908 and entitled *A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God*, he observes, for example, that James has not only taken his «logical principle», but that he has also «transmogrified it into a doctrine of philosophy, some parts of which I highly approved, while other and more prominent parts I regarded, and still regard, as opposed to sound logic» (EP2: 448); consequently, says Peirce, he had renamed its original principle 'pragmaticism' in order to distinguish it from James's more popularized version (EP2: 335). Elsewhere, Peirce similarly observes that James had «pushed this method to such extremes as must tend to give us pause» (CP 5.3).

One natural question, then, is to what extent James has modified «the principle of Peirce» and in which respects the two formulations differ. In particular, is James's pragmatism interpretable as an independent doctrine, as a misreading, or as an extension of Peirce's pragmaticism? One way to answer this question is to refer to Peirce's comments, and thus to observe that he and James recognized two different kinds of consequences as the «true interpreters of our thought» (CP 5.3). Another practical way is to say that for Peirce pragmatism means a theory of meaning, while for James it means a theory of truth as well (*P*, 29). However, in what follows I shall argue that for genealogical and theoretical reasons, we would do better to adopt a more comprehensive approach.

Concerning the genealogical plane, we should not overlook that pragmatism, aside from a method and a philosophical movement, has also been the target of a remarkable process of story-telling driven by personal, historical, theoretical and narrative exigencies. The retrospective accounts given by Peirce and James were anything but neutral, and they have directly influenced both the shaping of the philosophical and cultural object 'pragmatism' and the successive assessment of its theoretical purport.

In particular, the claim that in 1898 James has «transmogrified» Peirce's logical principle into a doctrine of philosophy gives us a sharp picture of the facts. It conveys the idea that there is an original formulation of pragmatism; that this original formulation was Peirce's; and that James's derived version of pragmatism has therefore to be understood necessarily in the light of this original source. Consequently, James's pragmatism becomes interpretable either as a right or wrong, as a true or false, as a legitimate or illegitimate theoretical transplant of Peirce's logical principle to other areas. For example, both the idea of misreading and that of extension above mentioned are

similarly grounded on the idea of 'historical priority'. But this idea is genealogically imprecise, and thus potentially misleading, for at least two reasons.

First, if by «pragmatism» we intend Peirce's rule in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, then we ought to interpret it not as personal and immediate insight, but as Peirce's particular application to the logic of science of the same operative strategy that other members of the Metaphysical Club had previously applied to other issues. Moreover, as it is well known, in 1878 Peirce's essay the term "pragmatism" did not compare and, still in 1900, Peirce himself was unsure about his paternity and asked in a letter to James «Who has invented the term *pragmatism*, you or I? When did it appear in print? What do you intend with it?». From a genealogical point of view, thus, it is more correct to claim that pragmatism has been a collective result rather than the achievement of an individual mind, and that Peirce's merit in 1878 has been to define and to apply it as a fully explicit logical rule within a broader, general and coherent epistemological framework.

Second, in *Pragmatism* James remarks that after 1878 «the principle of Peirce» has laid «entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years» until 1898 when he «brought it forward again and made a special application of it to religion» (*P*, 26). However this is not historically correct. In fact, James has quoted in print Peirce's rule on two occasions, the first in 1881, in *Reflex Action and Theism*, and the second in 1884, in *On the Function of Cognition*. Still more important, as Maurice Baum (1933) has demonstrated, James had prior to 1879 substantially elaborated the core elements of the doctrine that he would later restate and develop firstly in 1898 and then in *Pragmatism*. In a essay written in French, and entitled *Some Considerations Regarding the Subjective Method*, we read that «a question has a meaning and is stated plainly when from the question a clear practical alternative follows, in such a way that, accordingly as one replies in one way or in another, one must adopt one course of conduct or another». «One sees that the problem has a meaning – he concluded – because it involves two contradictory solutions in practical life» (Baum 1933, 45-46). This is substantially the same position that he would present, twenty years later, in *Pragmatism*. Since this text was completed on 20 November 1877, it antedates the publication of Peirce's *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*. Hence, before 1898, James had already made a substantial use of the same principle that he would later call "pragmatism".

But, then, if we are compelled to interpret James's pragmatism neither as a misreading nor as an extension of Peirce's, how should we conceive their mutual relationship? The following shall suggest a third alternative, according to which the pragmatisms of Peirce and James are distinct theories which concede the same general attitude according to different goals. They had, without a doubt, some theoretical elements in common and the same genealogical roots, but they were elaborated with two diverse purposes in mind and within two diverse theoretical frameworks. To

make sense of this argument, we shall follow Christopher Hookway's (1997) suggestion, and thus we shall now ascertain which goals Peirce and James wanted to achieve, respectively, with a "logical principle" and a "philosophical attitude".

When Peirce talks of pragmatism he is without exception presenting it within an methodological framework. In the *Illustration of the Logic of Science* series, the principle was presented as a logical rule to clarify our ideas according to the same method we use in science. Thirty years later, Peirce restated the same idea claiming that «All pragmatists will further agree that their method of ascertaining the meanings of words and concepts is no other than [the] experimental method» (EP2: 401), while elsewhere he declares that he has come to frame the pragmatic doctrine as the logical equivalent of the experimentalist's attitude (EP2: 332). Thus, since pragmatism is nothing but the logical and explicit formulation of the scientific method itself, in order to determine its goal we should ask what the goal of science is according to Peirce.

«Science – writes Peirce in an illuminating passage – does not consist so much in *knowing*, nor even in "organized knowledge," as it does in diligent inquiry into truth for truth's sake, without any sort of axe to grind, nor for the sake of the delight of contemplating it, but from an impulse to penetrate into the reason of things» (CP 1.44). The immediate goal of science is the pursuit of truth for the truth's sake, but its ultimate aim is to let us penetrate and become one with the inner rationality of the Universe.

As he further explains in the entry for "Pragmatism" in the *Baldwin Dictionary*, reasonableness is the perfect esthetical ideal, for it is the only thing which does not require a reason itself, and «everybody will now agree that the ultimate good lies in the evolutionary process in some way. If so, it is not in individual reactions in their segregation, but in something general and continuous … the coalescence, the becoming continuous, the becoming governed by laws, the becoming instinct with general ideas, are but phases of one and the same process of the growth of reasonableness» (CP 5.4); significantly he then concludes that this synechistic process includes pragmatism «as a step».

How so? An example may illuminate this point. Let us consider a late definition of pragmatism given by Peirce, for example «The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol» (EP2: 346). Now, we can use pragmatism to rationally articulate the meaning of any symbol, including the terms that compose its own definition, like "conduct", "desires", "possible", etc. Thus we have a recursive application of the rule, which is potentially endless for we can apply it to every new definition that we obtain; at each step we develop our knowledge and, as we proceed to interpret, we learn and

discover new logical relations among signs, perhaps we might even create and then spread new symbolic connections, and thereby we increase both our rational control upon signs – that is, our ability to use them in purposeful and self-controlled patterns of behaviour –, *and* the regularity of the semiotic system to which we and those signs together belong. The more rational interpretation goes on, the more rationality we have in the system. Now, this is an oversimplified but fair account both of the self-organizing and propagating dynamic of scientific rationality and of the role that Peirce's pragmatism is expected to play in it.

It will be noted that, according to this example, if the goal is to increase the general rationality in the long run, it is irrelevant *who* (and perhaps even what) is actually interpreting; what is important is that semiotical interpretation goes on, for in any case inquiry will eventually approach its destined result, that is, the Truth, or, as Peirce defines it, «the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate», whose represented object is the Real: «what it is regardless of what you or I may think about it» (EP1: 139). This view echoes Peirce's idea that science is a social practice, grounded in an «indefinite community», for which individual research is of value only for the contribution it makes to the general progress toward the Truth. As Hookway (1997, 157) concludes, «Science requires reflective self-control; Peircean logic serves such self-controlled inquiry; and the pragmatic principle reveals the aspects of meaning which are relevant to this task».

James, instead, tells us that pragmatism is not a rule of science, but an 'attitude', a 'doctrine' or a 'method' of philosophy. In any case, in order to determine its goal, we should ask what the goal of philosophy is according to James. The point is, however, precisely that for James philosophy does not have any determined and unique goal; like science it is a human activity and thus it reflects the contingent plurality of ideals which permeates our multifaceted and infinitely complex experience. Theoretically, James's pragmatism is thus closely allied both with a pluralistic world-view and with Schiller's *humanism*. Human beings have many goals, all of which are in part man-made, and pragmatism as a philosophical method serves us precisely to clarify and articulate their plurality in reference to our experience.

As a general attitude, pragmatism consists in «*looking away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed necessities; and [in] looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts*». As a doctrine of philosophy, it let us settling «metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable» (*P*, 25), and thus to choose *in abstracto* between philosophical alternatives, such as 'pluralism' instead of monism, or 'meliorism' instead of optimism and pessimism. As a practical method, instead, it connects general philosophical conceptions with our individual experiences, ascertaining «what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if

this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one». The religious faith in the Absolute, for example, is a hypothesis that may well be alive for me but dead for you, and yet pragmatism may be useful, as a philosophical method, for both of us. «On a pragmatic principle – writes James – we can not reject any hypothesis if consequences useful from life flow from it» (*P,* 123); hence, since every life-experience is in certain respects individual and unique, the same hypothesis may entail difference practical consequences for two different people.

For James, pragmatism is thus a proposal which is vindicated in a range of areas of application by its actual and varied fruits; for Peirce it is a method whose validity is measured only by the degree in which it let us contribute to one general thing: scientific progress (Hookway 1997). For Peirce, who is actually applying pragmatism it is quite irrelevant (since the indefinite community includes everybody in general, it does not include anybody in particular); for James, however, the application of pragmatism to a conception or theory is meaningful just in the light of the actual, particular and often unrepeatable experience of a specific human being.

From this point of view, it may then be unsurprising that Peirce and James have recognized different kinds of consequences as the true interpreters of our conceptions: general and in terms of conduct for the former, particular and in terms of conduct *and* sensation for the latter. Peirce's and James's pragmatisms have different aims, and thus they are intended to develop different aspects of the meanings of signs; Peircean pragmatism aims to develop their rational purport, while Jamesian pragmatism what we may call their 'existential purport'. Both aspects of meaning are prospective and live in the future; only they refer to different kinds of future: the former lives in general and the potential future of an indefinite scientific inquiry; the latter in that actual entanglement of present and future which characterises the finite and prismatic *lebenswelt* of a specific human being.

The same argument elucidates also why Peirce's and James's pragmatisms stand in rather different relations with the conception of Truth. The meaning of truth that Peirce's pragmatism clarifies is the one relevant to scientific inquiry; in this case, what we mean by "truth" is that when we call a statement "true" we are simply expressing our belief that an indefinitely and self-correcting process of inquiry will eventually confirm the content of that statement. For James, however, a "truth" means pragmatically nothing but the series of possible effects, actions and consequences that we would experience were we taking that particular truth within our phenomenological *umwelt*. «Truth – writes James – for us is simply a collective name for verification processes [it] is *made*, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience» (*P*, 98). Hence Peirce and James are interested in different aspects of truth: Peirce in the rational meaning of the Truth for the purpose of scientific inquiry; James in the existential purport that actual truths may have on the shaping of our experience.

Along the same line we can understand too why Peirce's and James had a different position on radical empiricism. In the preface of *Pragmatism*, James declares that «there is no logical connexion between pragmatism, as I understand it, and a doctrine which I have recently set forth as 'radical empiricism'» (*P,* 3). Peirce, contrarily, called himself «a pragmatism or radical empiricist» (CP 7.617) and declared that James's «radical empiricism substantially answered to the writer's definition of pragmatism» (EP2: 334). Radical empiricism, says James in *The Meaning of Truth¸* involves the "postulate" that any meaningful conception should be interpretable in term of experience; the "fact" that we experience directly both singular things and relations among things; and the "conclusion" that experience form «a concatenated or continuous whole» (MT, xii-xiii). Being committed to a realist epistemological framework, Peircean pragmatism must be grounded on these ideas if it wants to vindicate a conception of rationality, or thirdness, as something that we directly perceive and that we can further articulate logically with pragmatism in terms of future regularity of experimental phenomena. For James, instead, pragmatism is a method of a pluralistic philosophy which *a priori* is not likewise committed to any particular of definite theory of knowledge; hence the complementarity between the two doctrines, but not their necessary relationship.

Here it is not contended that, were not for their different aims and interests, Peirce and James would have had perfectly identical positions on meaning, truth, and epistemology. What is claimed is, instead, that their differences on these issues *cannot be explained on the pragmatic level*. That is to say, if a theoretical difference exists on these issues, then its reason is not in how Peirce and James understood differently pragmatism, but in other elements of their thought to which pragmatism was a functional part. In an illuminating passage, after having remarked that between his and James's pragmatism there exist certainly no «slight theoretical difference», Peirce himself observes that

though we may differ on important questions of philosophy – especially as regards the infinite and the absolute – I am inclined to think that the discrepancies reside in other than the pragmatistic ingredients of our thought. If pragmatism had never been heard of, I believe the opinion of James on one side, of me on the other would have developed substantially as they have; notwithstanding our respective connecting them at present with our conception of that method (CP 5.466)

Hence, if a theoretical difference exists between the two formulations of pragmatism – besides the goal and the context of application –, then this difference is not in how Peirce and James understand the implications of a shared pragmatic principle, but in other elements of their thought,

and especially in those which are related to their metaphysics: 'realist' and founded on 'triadic categories' for Peirce; 'nominalistic' and 'pluralistic' for James.

If this is correct, James's pragmatism is neither a misreading nor an extension of Peirce's one. Rather, they represent two distinct ways of declining the same operative strategy within diverse theoretical frameworks and according to partially diverse purposes. Another way to say the same thing is to remark that the pragmatism of Peirce and James can be interpreted as two different kinds of reactions. With pragmatism Peirce reacted to an antiquated, dualistic and rationalistic model of knowledge and rationality, while James to those past and contemporary philosophical world-formulas – from rationalism to empiricism and monism – that give us a unidirectional, simplified and thus misleading account of what human experience is. Historically they shared the same genealogical roots – and thus they show many family resemblances both with the works of the other members of the Metaphysical Club and with other pragmatists –; then, after 1898, their destiny became entangled, but, like two brothers, they eventually developed their own distinct individuality. In order to assess the philosophical purport of James's pragmatism it is not enough to regard it as a derived version of Peirce's one. Instead, it should be considered as a self-standing doctrine of philosophy which should be evaluated within its proper theoretical framework.

From this point of view, let me conclude by drawing an analogy between the three ideas discussed in this communication and the three ways in which James Edie (1984) has argued that we can interpret the contemporary relevance of James's philosophical production. The first recognizes that James had a tremendous impact on the history of thought, but now it belongs only to the history of philosophy. The second way, more widespread and vital than the first, is to consider James as a "culture-hero" that is, as the perfect interpretant of the living, revolutionary, tragic and multifaceted spirit of his own time. The third, then, is to consider James as a philosopher as such, and thus to regard his thought as a potential source of doctrines, conceptual instruments, and insights that we can still further elaborate and apply. I think that one of merits of this conference is to vindicate this latter option, demonstrating that after more than a century William James's thought and pragmatism are still living options to challenge the contemporary issues of science and philosophy.

Abbreviations

CP *v.p* indicates *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (voll. 1-6 edited by a P. Weiss and C. Hartshorne, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1931-1935; voll. 7-8 edited by A.W. Burks, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1958); *v* refers to the volume number, *p* to the paragraph number.

EP *v:p* indicates *The Essential Peirce*, (2 voll., edited by the Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis and Bloomington, 1992-1998); *v* refers to the volume number, *p* to the page number.

P indicates *Pragmatism*, edited by B. Kuklick, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1981.

MT indicates *The Meaning of Truth*, Longmans and Green, London, 1909.

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