

Genteel Pragmatism in Nineteenth-Century America and Great Britain

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Ellen Redling

3 Genteel Pragmatism in Nineteenth-Century America and Great Britain

Pragmatism, a term derived from *pragma* (Gr. ‘action’) that indicates practical action rather than philosophical contemplation, often is regarded as a distinctly American strand of philosophy, since it blends philosophy with ordinary life¹ and focuses on problem-solving and future-oriented ‘positive’ – or rather ‘melioristic’² – thinking. A strong sense of hope for a better future suffuses pragmatism, rendering it particularly American, as Colin Koopman expounds. He highlights “[p]ragmatism’s prioritization of hopefulness” (2006: 112) and alludes to “America [...] as a symbol of hope” (112).

Shortly after its beginnings on the American east coast in the second half of the nineteenth century, ‘American’ pragmatism reached Great Britain, where it provoked conflicting reactions. The British analytic philosophers G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell shed a very negative light on it, referring to pragmatism as “lightweight” philosophy (Sprigge 1997: 127), while other philosophers welcomed pragmatism’s turning away from traditional philosophical *a priori* reflection and concomitant emphasis on down-to-earth methods connected to an active life. Among the latter F. C. S. Schiller’s understanding of humanistic pragmatism is most notable.

Despite its apparent hands-on approach to life, a strand of genteel aloofness characterized William James’s pragmatism, which constitutes the main focus of this paper. As will be shown here, this aloofness was largely caused by British Romantic and Victorian ideas of genius and heroism, which informed James’s perspective on pragmatism to a great extent. Most particularly, it was the Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle’s exuberant appreciation of ‘heroic’ social, cultural and religious figures which enticed the American pragmatist to question a merely scientific basis of the movement. On the other hand, the

¹ Dewey stated that he loved “to think that there is something profoundly American in [William] James’s union of philosophy with life” (qtd. in Goodman 1990: 128).

² As David Hildebrand (2013: 59) explains: “Meliorism is the view that it is both a logical and moral error to declare that life – presently or ultimately – is either perfectly good or bad; life should be understood as *improvable* [...]. As applied to philosophy, meliorism [...] means that philosophy’s *raison d’être* is to make life *better*. Meliorism is no sentimental faith, but a working hypothesis whose plausibility rests upon observation and experience. Trying out this hypothesis obliges the philosopher (any intellectual, really) to keep alive a dynamic interaction between theory and practice so that results continue to address the problems rooted in daily life” (emphasis original).

British Romantic influence also contributed to the confluence of aesthetics with a scientific stance in John Dewey's philosophy. I begin with the impact of the British-American traveling concept of Romantic heroism and genteelism on the newly developed American pragmatism, which focused on science, but struggled with non-scientific notions like belief.

1 British-American Genteelism and American Pragmatism

In this section I argue that although the American founder of pragmatism centered his movement on empiric scientism, he was unable to dismiss 'belief' as a self-contained value completely in his theory, leaving his successors to fill this gap. Pragmatist philosophy arose in a genteel environment in the early 1870s at Harvard, but the discussions among the group to which both the founding father Charles Peirce (1839–1914) and his pupil, William James (1842–1910), belonged, promoted public intellectualism rather than ivory-tower theories. The group referred to itself as the 'Metaphysical Club,' but the name was tongue-in-cheek, since the club advocated turning away from traditional ideas of metaphysics which worked with *a priori* methods (Malachowski 2013a: 1–2). Peirce was a mathematician and logician. In one of his two most influential papers, "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), he argues that the strict *a priori* method does not consider "observed facts" (Peirce 1965a: 238) and starts from the wrong end: it uses fixed, abstract premises and begins from there (238–242). Since figures of authority, such as high government officials or priests, often formulate such premises, the *a priori* method is similar to the method of authority (242). Neither of the two methods gives the 'common man' real freedom in reaching his own opinion and choice (242). Instead, Peirce maintains that the scientific method of fixing belief often requires that one move from doubt to opinion to doubt again and again (234–235), though he does not claim like Descartes that doubt leads to truth. Rather, in Peirce's view, one reaches the right conclusion when one considers the outcome of an action. The right conclusion may not be attained in anyone's lifetime, but instead may be part of a very long process of testing.

In his famous main maxim, put forward in his paper "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878), Peirce writes: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Peirce 1965b: 258). Peirce explains this maxim by defining the adject-

tive ‘hard’ in his own way. Rather than employing abstract definitions, he turns to the effects: “[...] let us ask what we mean by calling a thing *hard*. Evidently that it will not be scratched by many other substances. [...] There is absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test” (259–260; emphasis original). He expresses a disbelief in anything speculative, mysterious or which has “that bad logical quality to which the epithet *metaphysical* is commonly applied” (243; emphasis original). All of these are moot questions for him, since they have nothing to do with facts. When speaking about a ‘mysterious entity,’ he says that people usually use this terminology whenever their thoughts are unclear. Nevertheless, he insists that his logical, scientific method can be applied to *any* kind of situation of doubt and belief;³ he even includes religious matters, as he does not wish to deal with them in any theoretical way.⁴ This all-encompassing notion of considering “any question, no matter how small or how great” (253) as well as Peirce’s intriguingly *unclear* idea that “a method should be found by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (1965a: 242)⁵ create room for interpretation regarding ‘great matters.’

Peirce’s vagueness about deeper beliefs left pragmatism with an open gap, which James, his pupil and successor, filled with ideas not only on human, but also superhuman concerns. William James was torn between pragmatism’s original scientific basis and his interest in the inexplicable. This conflict created difficulties for his readers. The British philosopher G. E. Moore argued, for instance, that James was trying to reduce philosophy to mere matters of practical human concern and therefore, for instance, X exists on the grounds of mere convenience, regardless of whether X actually exists (cf. Malachowski 2013b: 36). In particular, James’s work *The Will to Believe* (1897) was “often interpreted as defending the view that truth is whatever we need to believe or that we should believe whatever we wish” (Goodman 1990: 77). At the time, critics

³ As Peirce writes, “I use [the terms Doubt and Belief] to designate the starting of *any* question, no matter how small or how great, and the resolution of it” (1965b: 253; emphasis added).

⁴ When he actually discusses religion, he strictly keeps to material – i.e., empirically testable – matters, and does not allow any ‘mysterious entity’ to enter into the equation. For instance, he calls it a “senseless” approach (1965b: 258) to talk about transubstantiation when one really is looking only at the “sensible qualities [...] of wafer-cakes and diluted wine” (257). He thereby bypasses the main theological problem, even stating that there is none if one simply looks at the “sensible effects” (258).

⁵ Peirce here probably wishes to counter *a priori* philosophy by focusing on effects in this world rather than on something that is determined by preconceived human notions, but vague sentences such as this one arguably open up the path to differing interpretations.

often simplified and derided James and his ideas, calling him a “lightweight philosopher” (Sprigge 1997: 127). However, while Moore states that James was saying that all, and only, true ideas are verifiable as well as that all, and only, true ideas are useful, his critical counter-argument that there must be many an unverifiable true idea and many useful ideas that are not necessarily true (125–127) inadvertently does justice to the two-sidedness of James’s approach. This discussion reveals both James’s closeness to practical human concerns in his pragmatism and his interest in unverifiable – or at least not *immediately* verifiable – ideas.

This two-sidedness becomes evident in his new and recurrent elaborations on religion, which he begins with some wavering but develops into a real concern. At the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James displays his contradictory approach to religion. On the one hand, he puts forward questions – together with James Henry Leuba, whom he quotes – such as: “Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he?,” claiming that these are “irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion” (James 1982: 507). On the other hand, he talks about going beyond “subjective utility” (507), maintaining: “*the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*” (515; emphasis original). He refers to this continuity as “a positive content of religious experience which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes*” (515; emphasis original).⁶ Thus, “subjective utility,” one of the major tenets of pragmatism as it would seem, is insufficient for James; he needs to look for “intellectual content” (507) and “higher” powers (508). Similarly, his paper “Is Life Worth Living?” (1895) presents a supernatural view of religion. Again, he focuses on epistemological matters rather than religion’s effects in *this* world according to a ‘typical’ pragmatist pattern of research.

In “Is Life Worth Living?” James discusses the nature of religion and speaks of another world, an “unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained” (James 1972: 23). He argues that we simply need to believe that “this world of nature is a sign of something more spiritual and eternal than itself” (25). For James this is a leap of faith, but an absolutely necessary one. To illustrate this, he details a life-and-death situation: you find yourself on a mountain and in “a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap” (27). If you do not jump because you are skeptical – because you “[r]efuse to believe” (27) – then “you shall indeed be

⁶ Rorty (1998: 30) has referred to James’s ideas on “positive content” as “unfortunate [...],” arguing that “this claim to literal and objective truth is unpragmatic, hollow, and superfluous.”

right, for you shall irretrievably perish” (27). The only solution therefore is taking the leap of faith and going forward on a hopeful maybe.⁷ James opposes thinkers like the British philosopher W. K. Clifford, who needs firm evidence before he is prepared to believe anything. This – James maintains – is a harmful skepticism that leads nowhere.⁸

James adopts a preaching mode as his final move in “Is Life Worth Living?,” postulating the idea of ‘just believing,’ which dismisses any pragmatic elaboration on potential social or ethical effects of faith.⁹ In this impassioned spirit James links religious belief to the courageous actions of “faithful fighters,” i.e. those of exceptional individuals rather than a community. He writes:

These, then are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The ‘scientific proof’ that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgement [...] is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV greeted the tardy

⁷ James (1972: 27) aims to link this back to a ‘traditional’ pragmatic perspective by claiming that science also often works with maybes and that therefore religious belief resembles scientific belief. Furthermore, he says in *The Will to Believe* (1896) that a “government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team” often only end up being successful due to an initial strong belief (James 1979: 29). Nevertheless, his standing by the “unseen order” does pose a certain difficulty for ‘traditional’ pragmatism, as Rorty’s reaction for instance shows (see footnote 6).

⁸ David A. Hollinger (1997: 70) has expounded that James simplified and misread Clifford to fit his purposes. According to the critic, James “displays little awareness of what Clifford actually said” and “[t]hese misrepresentations served to conceal important intellectual ground that James actually shared with Clifford.” Hollinger sees Clifford as more concerned with “the consequences of belief for social action” (76) than James was and therefore – in these cases – as the greater effective ‘pragmatist’ than James.

⁹ This attitude goes against both John Dewey’s and Richard Rorty’s notions of religious belief or, more specifically, of Christian faith. In their view the assertion of belief as such is not important in and of itself but is relevant as a socially useful force which promotes the ideas of fraternity and equality among human beings and thereby paves the way for a democratic society (cf. Rorty 1998: 26–29). Rorty attributes James’s emphasis on an “unseen order” and on exclusionism to James’s “sense of guilt” (31), which he contrasts with Dewey’s abandoning his mother’s belief in original sin: “Dewey simply stopped thinking that, in James’s words, ‘there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand.’ He no longer believed that we could be ‘saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers.’ He thought that all that was wrong with us was that the Christian ideal of fraternity had not yet been achieved – society had not yet become pervasively democratic. That was not a problem to be solved by making the proper connection with higher powers, but a problem of men to be solved by men” (Rorty 1998: 31). James’s family “did not belong to a church” (Goodman 1990: 64). However, he was influenced by his father’s belief in Swedenborg’s ‘findings’ on angels, and he frequently moved in exclusive Protestant academic circles.

Crillon after a great victory had been gained: 'Hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Arques, and you were not there.' (James: 1972: 29)

In this admonition James does not, as Sprigge (1997: 131) puts it, state that "our reasons for belief may legitimately be chosen to suit our emotional needs where cognitive considerations cannot settle an important issue." Rather, he diminishes the pursuit of "scientific proof" which might not come "before the day of judgement" and urges his followers to reach the goal before the "faint-hearted" who do not dare to go beyond waiting for such proof.

At this point, the influence of James's father's famous British friend, Thomas Carlyle (1764–1881), the author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), which shows a strong indebtedness to Romantic notions of heroism and genius figures, is clearly visible. For Carlyle, too, the important aspect is that a strong belief in a heroic figure is able to inspire people – that there is excitement of some sort (cf. Carlyle 1993: 3). Science and skepticism ruin such an excitement and wonder (cf. 64; 85). Like James he laments: "On the whole, we make too much of faults; the details of the business hide the real centre of it" (41). To Carlyle, belief initiated by a hero-figure is enough. Following Carlyle's lead regarding heroism, James moves away from down-to-earth pragmatism. Carlyle says: "Effect? Influence? Utility? Let a man *do* his work; the fruit of it is the care of Another than he" (85). Like Carlyle, James expresses his admiration for a great military leader like Henry IV who inspires people and denounces faintheartedness. He makes an even further claim about the importance of a heroic spirit. James suggests that a suffering, 'low' person could "acquiesce" to "diabolical-seeming events" that are controlled by a higher level into which he has no immediate insight and that this acquiescence would be a heroic act. In the vein of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," James compares the position of a poor man without insight ("without a single redeeming ray") to that of a dog being vivisected, who would happily agree to this "sort of hell" if he could only glimpse its higher meaning:

Consider a poor dog whom they are vivisecting in a laboratory. He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at his executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming events are often controlled by human intentions with which, if his poor benighted mind could only be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce. (James 1972: 27)

James links heroic human intentions to divine ones. Carlyle also asks: "Can the man say, *Fiat lux*, Let there be light; and out of chaos make a world? Precisely as there is light in himself, will he accomplish this" (Carlyle 1993: 88). In one of the letters to his brother Henry, William even indicates that he himself

is a hero for having written his book *Pragmatism* (1907), which he “believe[s] [...] to be something quite like the protestant reformation” (Skrupskelis and Berkeley 1994: III, 339).

James displays the belief that heroism and heroic admiration of a great figure will change the world, rather than scientific methods and testing (the vivisection) alone, as Peirce would have argued. This resembles Carlyle’s Romantic notion of an exceptional human being, a genius, represented by an outstanding politician, military leader, poet or man of letters, spreading inspiration among the wider public. The main problem of this approach lies in the hierarchical relationship envisaged between the source of inspiration and the inspired person, which challenges pragmatism’s orientation towards equality among people. As Carlyle (1993: 14) puts it: “[...] does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to *what is really above him?*” (emphasis added). It is precisely such a hierarchical ‘great men’ theory that Carlyle’s British contemporary Samuel Smiles criticizes. His famous book on *Self-Help* (1859) suggests that no hero, mentor or teacher is needed since all people can help themselves and improve their own lives (cf. Smiles 1997: 1–4). Furthermore, a young man need not become a hero, but simply do his job – whatever it may be – to the best of his ability (3). Smiles is interested in “the lives of men unwritten, which have nevertheless as powerfully influenced civilization and progress as the more fortunate Great whose names are recorded in biography” (3–4). Smiles also attacks the way British society strives towards genteelism (183–184). William James shows similar ‘genteel’ tendencies to shut himself off from the rest of society, as shown in this quote regarding his desire for a “private bed-room”:

The ‘through-and-through’ universe seems to suffocate me with its infallible impeccable all-pervasiveness. Its necessity, with no possibilities; its relations, with no subjects, make me feel [...] as if I had to live in a large seaside boarding-house with no private bed-room in which I might take refuge from the society of the place [...]. (James 1976: 142)

Like a Romantic hero figure, James imagines that the world’s possibilities are only visible when alone, as an extraordinary individual rather than one person among many in a society of “relations.” James therefore at times interpreted pragmatism in terms of an exuberant – or even exaggerated – self-orientation and hero-worship, while other pragmatists sought to bring the method back down to earth.

2 F. C. S. Schiller's Humanistic Pragmatism

The British philosopher of German descent F. C. S. Schiller (1864–1937) studied and taught at Oxford in England as well as Cornell in America, where he became increasingly interested in a Jamesian American pragmatism. His correspondence with James, who was at Harvard at the time, had a lasting impact on him: Schiller extracted and developed his own, humanistic version of pragmatism from the American philosopher's wide-ranging theories, and promoted his ideas when he returned to England. He agreed with Charles Peirce that constantly looking for a better truth was good, because it mirrored methods of the natural sciences. But like William James, Schiller believed that Peirce's notion of pragmatism was much too vague. Instead of filling the gaps in Peirce's writings to widen the field of study as James did, Schiller, however, narrowed pragmatism even further.

The British philosopher especially questions what Peirce means by “practical bearings” in terms of pragmatism, asserting: “to say that a truth has consequences and that what has none is meaningless means that it has a bearing upon some human interest” (Schiller 1966b: 59). He concludes that the “‘consequences’ [of a truth] must be consequences *to* someone engaged on a real problem *for* some purpose” (59; emphasis original). For Schiller pragmatism should serve ‘humanism,’ or the idea that ‘man’ is the center of all things. To him, every ‘truth’ of pragmatism must be connected to a concrete situation that involves certain human beings at a particular time and for a certain reason. This idea not only simplified the practical application of pragmatism, but also narrowed it to a philosophy only concerned with the “living experience of an honest man” (Schiller 1966a: 22). Like Peirce, Schiller wished to avoid entanglement in ‘unclear’ objects of study such as religion.¹⁰ However, Peirce, who also restricted himself to a scientific approach, left the discussion of ‘belief’ more open than Schiller. He not only paved the way for James's traditional supernaturalism, but also for Dewey's *natural* supernaturalism¹¹ and aesthetics. Dewey

¹⁰ See Schiller's statement: “[...] it would not be hard to show that at the very core of the religious sentiment there linger survivals of the fears and terrors with which primitive man was inspired by the spectacle of an uncomprehended universe” (Schiller 1966c: 270).

¹¹ Goodman (1990: 60) explains “natural supernaturalism” – together with Carlyle and M. H. Abrams – as “the idea that our human encounters with the natural world can be wide and deep enough to contain the experiences traditionally ascribed to the influx from abroad of a divine power.” Goodman, however, believes that James and Dewey are natural supernaturalists to a very similar degree (cf. 60) and practically ignores the crucial role that traditional supernaturalism and the “unseen order” play in James's work (cf. Goodman 1990: 69).

ey's approach in turn created a greater harmonious fusion of tangibility and intangibility, science and spirituality, than James had envisioned.

3 The Confluence of Aesthetics and Science in John Dewey's Pragmatism

James's genteelism allowed him to give credit to both an "unseen order" and the heroic creative talents of poets, ideas of religion and high aesthetics that went beyond Peirce's pragmatism. Schiller developed a radical humanistic approach from his study of American pragmatism, which James's theories to some extent entailed, but to which they were not restricted. The philosophers' engagement with dominant philosophical theories on the respective other side of the Atlantic – James with Carlyle's concepts in Great Britain, Schiller with James's ideas in America – helped both of them in distinct ways: it led James to go beyond mere science and encouraged Schiller to adopt a less illusionary and more down-to-earth theory for his humanistic concerns. John Dewey (1859–1952), the last of the best-known pragmatists to be born in the nineteenth century, was however the only pragmatist who successfully avoided pitting religion and aesthetics against science and objectivity and integrated the two sides.

While James tried in vain to solve the paradox between empirical science and traditional supernaturalism, Dewey chose a different approach. He rejected the belief in an "unseen order" as James put it, but maintained an awareness of how religion functioned as an enrichment of human life and society, and he relied on the scientific method as a trustworthy tool to increase the well-being of mankind. Thus, he regarded both religion and science as *this*-worldly matters and discussed their usefulness regarding social improvements. Similarly, in the field of aesthetics, James advocated his interests in genius-poets and 'high' art, which clashed with ideals of equality and democracy that are often linked to pragmatism. Dewey, in contrast, married 'high' art with public art through the development of a theory of aesthetics that unites subjectivity with objectivity, singularity with generality, and the extraordinary with the ordinary. While he valued the aesthetic heightening of 'our' world by the poets, he repudiated traditional notions of transcendental existence. Thus, Dewey acknowledged that there might be something more than this palpable world and that this recognition could constitute a quasi-religious, aesthetic experience, but confined himself to notions of 'divinity' in *this* world, such as natural supernaturalism. Moreover, he brought this 'divinity' much further down to earth than James and Carlyle did.

When looking for a literary example to illustrate his aesthetic theory, Dewey therefore does not refer to hero figures – such as poets and literary characters – that stand *above* the ordinary, but instead advocates a different Romantic idea: that of the extraordinary *within* the ordinary. For instance, he turns to the poems of John Keats (1795–1821), in which he found an accomplished union between emotion and thought, body and mind, subject and object, poetry and philosophy – rather than to other poets who unconditionally celebrated subjectivity and Romantic genius figures. As Dewey (2005: 129) expounds: “No poet is more directly sensuous than Keats. But no one has written poetry in which sensuous qualities are more intimately pervaded by objective events and scenes.” Dewey does not analyze a specific poem by Keats in elaborate detail, but one could use Keats’s “Lamia” (1819) to exemplify what the pragmatist means. In this poem a young man falls in love with a monster, Lamia, who has taken on the form of a beautiful woman. Enraptured by love, he does not see what Lamia really is, while the sophisticated philosopher Apollonius, the young man’s former mentor, perceives this clearly. Apollonius represents “cold philosophy” (“Lamia” II, l. 230) rather than the magic of love and poetry. The poem suggests that love and poetry can spin dangerously out of control if they completely lose touch with normal life. They can overwhelm the individual and even cause his death; the young man in the poem dies at the end, devastated by the sudden recognition of the reality of his love, which the philosopher points out to him. Keats here joins idealism with realism and poetry with philosophy. He also brings together the individual and society, as the young man makes the mistake of triumphantly showing off his love to society, rather than leading a simple life either within nature or within society. This shows that the both aesthetically and democratically-minded Dewey combines the subjective with the objective, the ideal with the real, while James’s genteelism merely celebrates the emotional appeal of whatever is singularly subjective.

Dewey upheld the scientific method and linked its inherent objectivity with the subjectivity of the individual in his aesthetic approach. He thus found a solution to the debate about science and belief – and science and aesthetics – which had torn pragmatism apart. This discussion had been led by different theorists on both sides of the Atlantic, and Dewey’s approach was clearly also a transnational one since his integration of the two respective notions developed from John Keats’s earlier compelling vision of a union between them.

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