

**PRACTICE, AGENCY, & SOCIALITY:
AN ORTHOGONAL READING OF CLASSICAL PRAGMATISM**

Vincent Colapietro
The Pennsylvania State University

ABSTRACT. The author offers an orthogonal reading of American pragmatism to that put forth in Norbert Wiley's "Pragmatism and the Dialogical Self." He stresses practice, agency, and sociality in different ways than does Wiley as well as characterizes pragmatism in terms of its opposition to intuitionism, foundationalism, theoreticism, and dualism. This reading provides a thicker recontextualization than does Wiley in his article, allowing us to see how pragmatism might be of even greater *use* to social theorists.

The points on which Norbert Wiley focuses in his innovative appropriation of the pragmatic outlook are, in my judgment, among the most important ones to discuss. Moreover, he does much to embed a definitive trajectory of classical pragmatism – that culminating in the nuanced articulation of the notion of the dialogical self – in a thick history (cf. Wiley, 1994; Halton, 1986; Archer, 2003). Even so, I have reservations about his explication of the theory – or theories – of meaning he attributes to the various pragmatists, especially Charles Peirce (Colapietro, 2004; cf. Smith, 1984; Fisch, 1986). In addition, I sense the need for an even thicker contextualization than the one he provides. But these reservations and this need are expressed in the context of appreciation and admiration. In his role as a social scientist, Wiley has made creative *use* of central figures in the pragmatic movement. Indeed, he has made a compelling case for the direct relevance of American pragmatism to some of the central concerns of social science (Joas, 1993; Halton, 1997). Wiley's interest in these figures is, at once, historical and theoretical. But the historical reconstruction of American pragmatism is in the end undertaken for the sake of theoretical illumination – the light such a reconstruction can cast on a tangled cluster of central questions confronting the social theorist, above all, questions concerning meaning, subjectivity, symbolic mediation, and everyday life (Halton, 1986). My aim in this response to "Pragmatism and the Dialogical Self" is mainly to make a handful of suggestions for how to sketch a thicker context in which to place Wiley's own detailed contextualization of the dialogical self (a contextualization beginning with James, running through Peirce, Mead, Dewey, and Cooley, then culminating with Blumer). In making these suggestions, I hope to supplement his achievement, since "Pragmatism and the Dialogical Self" unquestionably makes an invaluable contribution to providing a thick context for understanding classical pragmatism.

AUTHOR NOTE. Please address all correspondence regarding this article to Vincent Colapietro, PhD, Department of Philosophy, 240 Sparks Building, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA. Email: vxc5@psu.edu

At the origin of pragmatism, we find C. S. Peirce's critique of Cartesianism (Bernstein, 1971; Delaney, 1973). In time, this critique will encompass at least four tendencies (intuitionism, foundationalism, dualism, and theoreticism) traditionally associated with the Cartesian approach to philosophical questions and, more generally, deeply inscribed in various traditions in European philosophy. At its origin, however, the rejection of intuitionism and foundationalism is in the foreground, that of dualism and theoreticism far in the background (if present at all). Let us note briefly Peirce's rejection of each of these tendencies.

(1) *Anti-Intuitionism*. Against the Cartesian insistence on immediate knowledge (or intuitive cognition), Peirce replaces self-warranting cognitions with self-corrective practices (Sellars, 1997; Delaney, 1973). Closely connected to this, the quest for absolute certainty is replaced by the search for experientially fecund meanings: the question of absolute truth moreover becomes more and more eclipsed by a preoccupation with everyday meanings (Dewey, 1925/1988). Stated positively, the radical rejection of Cartesian intuitionism imposes the necessity to offer a semiotic account of human consciousness, mind, subjectivity, cognition, and much else (Shapiro, 1983; Colapietro, 1989). Thus, the rejection of intuitionism is, in its constructive implications, a turn toward semiosis (or sign-activity). The self-corrective practices of experimental inquiry and (especially in the case of James, Dewey, and Mead) democratic deliberation provide the pragmatists with models of invincibly fallible yet frequently effective cognitive endeavors (Rorty, 1961; Sellars, 1997; Delaney, 1973). Though retaining a commitment to *qualitative* immediacy, the pragmatists reject the notion of *cognitive* immediacy or intuitive knowledge (Bernstein 1967). Unsuspected processes of mediation structure and direct our most spontaneous acts of seemingly "immediate" recognition, assertion, and evaluation. The task of social and other theorists accordingly includes that of marking the presence of such processes and exhibiting their working.

(2) *Anti-Foundationalism*. Against the widely held assumption that human knowledge requires an indubitable foundation, Peirce replaces this putatively necessary foundation for our epistemic claims with perceptual judgments of a corrigible character and, once again, a self-corrective method (Delaney, 1973). The quest for absolute certainty is replaced by the effort to secure (or "fix") experientially reliable beliefs, habits on which we can go or act. The method of *universal* doubt is thus replaced by the method of *strategic* doubt, motivated by specific difficulties.

(3) *Anti-Dualism*. We are always already implicated in the lives and activities of others, in such ways and to such a degree that our relationship to our selves is complexly mediated by our relationships to others. This is but one of the dualisms – that between self and other – against which the pragmatists were opposed. The dualism of thought and language (or, more precisely, semiosis) is another, animality and humanity is yet another, the private and public spheres still another. The deep, defining

PRACTICE, AGENCY, & SOCIALITY

antipathy toward dualisms of this sort is, however, conjoined to the felt need to draw functional, fluid, and nonetheless critical distinctions. Whereas the elevation of such distinctions as those between mind and body, self and other, culture and nature, or cognition and emotion, into dualisms is to be strenuously resisted, the crafting of experientially illuminating distinctions is to be deliberately undertaken.

(4) *Anti-Theoreticism*. Theoreticism might be defined as the position that the strictly theoretical provides the most adequate, least distorted, representation of reality attainable by human beings (Bourdieu, 1992; Smith, 1992). Against the at least implicit presuppositions that the theoretical perspective is the ultimately authoritative one, that by a systematic process of intellectual purification (e.g., conscientious adherence to method of universal doubt) a pure knower, a disencumbered mind, attains in the first instance a self-grounding certainty (*Cogito ergo sum*) and shortly thereafter the buttressing certainty there is a benevolently disposed divinity (Descartes, 1996), the father of pragmatism argues for *the primacy of practice*. Peirce does so without violating the integrity of theory. The distinctive character of our strictly theoretical practices (our practices of investigation, defined in part by their aim of discovering what is not yet known) is recognized by Peirce but also James, Dewey, and Mead. The differential perspective of the theoretical knower is, from the pragmatist perspective itself, seen to be only one human orientation among various other ones (e.g., the religious, the ethical, the political, and the artistic).

Correlative to the rejection of intuitionism, foundationalism, dualism, and theoreticism, we find a compelling affirmation of human *agency* in its distinctively human form (Colapietro, 1997). We encounter a sign-using animal, continuous with other species, denied intuitive, infallible access to reality (including what this self is *really* feeling, doing, or thinking) – an agent exposed to the possibility of error at every turn and at every level. Yet, this fallible agent utterly dependent on misinterpretable signs is, in countless instances, a competent actor and, not infrequently, a deftly responsive participant in irreducibly complex situations. Indeed, the pragmatic face of the dialogical self is just this responsive participant in a human practice, especially at a critical juncture (i.e., a moment of crisis).

Such is the face of the father of pragmatism himself, at the moment of its inauguration. For Peirce in “The Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” was acting as a self-conscious participant in the self-corrective practice of experimental investigation, for the sake of advancing inquiry (above all, our inquiry into the nature and authority of inquiry itself). In other words, he was exercising a distinctive form of human agency for the sake of enhancing or augmenting the power of such agency: he was an experimental inquirer addressing other such inquirers regarding how most effectively to comport themselves in the context of inquiry (Colapietro, 1997). Given the apparently limited scope of his concern in these early essays, however, this is easy to miss.

At the outset, pragmatism was put forth by Peirce in an extremely modest form. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” he recommends a maxim designed to render clearer the meaning of signs as they occur in the specific context of experimental inquiry. This maxim was articulated by an inquirer for the sake of pushing inquiry forward. It was deliberately designed to accord with the practice of inquiry (with the *ethos* implicit in the practice of experimentalists), as exemplified in the historically evolved and evolving activities of such experimental investigators as physicists, chemists, biologists, optics, and astronomy. This maxim is not in itself a theory of meaning, though it arguably carries crucial implications for how to conceive what for experimental inquirers is the most important species of cognitive meaning (Colapietro, 2004). There is a complex story to be reconstructed about how a modest proposal regarding the clarification of experimental meanings is elaborated into a pragmatically inflected theory of the interpretant (the *interpretant* being one of the defining phases of the triadically structured process of semiosis, the other two being the *object* and the *sign* itself). For Peirce’s account of meaning we must turn to his explication and classification of the various kinds of interpretants (Savan, 1987-88; Shapiro, 1983; Short, 2005). Any adequate explication of the pragmatist approach to the various forms of meaning must, accordingly, encompass an explication of Peirce’s conception of the interpretant of signs (i.e., the “significate-effect” of signs).

Thus, pragmatism is, on my reading of this movement, not a unified doctrine or integrated set of more or less coherent doctrines. It is rather the sensibility of the historically self-conscious and methodologically self-critical participant in such practices as the sciences in which Peirce was trained and with which he identified throughout his life. Such a characterization of pragmatism implies the primacy of practice. Human organisms are the ingenious inheritors (Joas, 1997; Colapietro, 1997) and, in some measure, the deliberate innovators of a vast array of more or less intersecting practices. They become agents in recognizable human form only in and through their participation in such practices.

What is central to pragmatism is, first and foremost, a preoccupation with – and orientation toward – *pragmata*. These *pragmata* are our everyday affairs, the matters at hand (see, e.g., James, 2005; cf. Heidegger, 1962). Given this preoccupation and orientation, the self is a participant in a set of practices, ranging *from* unacknowledged, even disavowed and unconscious ones *to* formally acknowledged and consciously undertaken ones. The postmodern condition is one of ceaseless recontextualization, a condition in which, for example, the activity of experimental inquirers is recontextualized in the category of artful engagement¹ or that of philosophical

¹ No one has made this point more emphatically and compellingly than Dewey; “But if modern tendencies are justified in putting art and creation first, then the implications of this position should be avowed and carried through. It would then be seen that *science is an art*, that *art is a practice*, and that the only distinction worth drawing is not between practice and theory, but between those modes of

PRACTICE, AGENCY, & SOCIALITY

reflection is recontextualized in reference to psychoanalytic practice. Even within such a historical context of ceaseless recontextualization, however, the primacy of practice, no matter how variously inflected, is a salient feature, at least when this context is pragmatically conceived.

There is, closely connected to affirming the primacy of practice, a radical re-evaluation of everyday life, of quotidian experience. A text from James's *Pragmatism* (2005) bears eloquent testimony to this radical re-orientation:

The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself? The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into the shadow by the glories of the upper ether [the radiance of a transcendent order], must resume its rights. (p. 62)

This text needs to be read in conjunction with the opening chapter of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, especially the concluding paragraphs of that initial chapter. There Dewey asserts: "The most serious indictment to be brought against non-empirical philosophies is that they have cast a cloud over the things of ordinary experience [the affairs of everyday life]. They have not been content to rectify them. They have discredited the at large" (Dewey, 1925/1988, p. 40). Earlier he proposes what he characterizes as "a first-rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered to us": "Does it end in conclusions which, when referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?" (Dewey, 1925/1988, p. 18). Everyday life, as transfigured by pragmatic intelligence (i.e., by creative imagination), constitutes the sole site of human flourishing. The reclamation of such life is one of the central affirmations of classical pragmatism. Such life is one in which private reveries and personal fantasy play an ineliminable role (Colapietro, 1989; Archer, 2003), though the cultural sources and consequences of such "private meanings" are always matters of critical concern to the philosophical pragmatist.

Norbert Wiley's contribution to our understanding of pragmatism cannot be gainsaid. My own emphases might make it seem as though he and I are in important disagreement about fundamental matters. This is not the case. If we recontextualize his own emphases, we see even better than otherwise the force and subtlety of his proposals. Arguably, apart from such recontextualization, Wiley's sustained focus on human subjectivity as an emergent function and semiotic achievement encompassing a wide range of reflexive activities and a critical dimension of private signs is in danger

practice that are not intelligent [because rendered by structural features to self-corrective procedures], not inherently and immediately enjoyable, and those which are full of enjoyed meanings" (Dewey, 1925/1988; p. 268-69; emphasis added).

of reinscribing one of the principal dualisms the classical pragmatists sought to deconstruct, that of subjective and intersubjective spheres of human existence.

Human experience is an ongoing dialogue between the human organism and a complex environment, more fully, between a sign-using, symbol-making organism *and* a shifting yet inescapable, expansive yet constraining, potentially threatening yet sustaining environment. As a participant in this process, the human organism is transformed into a reflexive agent (a being capable of an indefinite range of reflexive functions, such as self-criticism, self-encouragement, and self-admonishment). As such an agent, this organism acquires the capacity to address itself in ways not immediately observable by others. In this and other ways, human signs acquire and proliferate “private” functions. The way the human organism addresses itself, the way public signs function at a predominantly or purely personal or private level, is interwoven with the way this agent is addressed by others. Private meanings are indeed ineradicable features of human life, though the sense of privacy here calls for clarification, indeed, for explicitly *pragmatic* clarification (Archer, 2003; Hanson, 1994). Affirming the primacy of human practices (i.e., shared practices) entails also affirming the primacy of intersubjective (or “public”) meanings. It also entails construing the articulation of “inner” or “private” meanings as the accomplishment of an irreducibly social actor. The “practical” consequences in terms of which our signs or utterances must be translated are consequences bearing upon one or more practices, that is, bearing upon how a somatic, social, situated and reflexive agent might *go on* (cf. Wittgenstein), might participate more or less effectively in some practice. The innermost or most private of our meanings, hence, are intelligible only in reference to an always more or less vague background of shared practices (Taylor, 1997). This is far from tantamount to denying such meanings; it is however of a piece with insisting upon the *potentially* intersubjective translatability of *all* human meanings, including our most private or idiosyncratic ones (Archer 2003; cf. Hanson, 1994). The primacy of practice implies, at least on my understanding, the primacy but also the ultimacy of intersubjectivity.

The pragmatic turn is at once a semiotic turn and (in a sense requiring immediate qualification) a reflexive turn (cf. Smith, 1992). It is a turn toward signs in their myriad forms, not just toward linguistic signs. It is also a turn toward the subject, though in the sense of a moral reckoning, not an epistemic self-grounding. While reflexivity is taken by the pragmatists to be constitutive of subjectivity (the “I” is a being who can take itself as an object and address itself as a subject), the sort of reflexivity involved here is not that of the transcendental subject whose reflexive stance toward its mundane involvements projects the illusion of an extra-mundane, trans-empirical – hence disembodied, ahistoric, monological and unsituated – self (Colapietro, 1990). The decentering of the subject entails neither the effacement of agency or the erasure of subjectivity (Colapietro, 1990; Colapietro, 1996). Pragmatism gives reflexive agency a human face and indeed a human body. It grants a complex,

PRACTICE, AGENCY, & SOCIALITY

creative, and ubiquitous role to the “I” without granting either originary centrality or absolute authority to the self. It grants primacy to our shared human practices and, in reference to these, grants limited yet real authority to the finite, fallible agents formed by their social interactions. But pragmatism arguably grants genuine efficacy to “internal conversation” (Wiley, 1994; Archer, 2003). The various sites of everyday experience (including those of artistic creation and scientific investigation, moral deliberation and practical engagement, political exchange and religious worship) provide such agents with the bulk of the motives, opportunities, obstacles, and criteria in reference to which such agency takes shape, maintains and indeed modifies itself. Like the work of Hans Joas and Eugene Halton, Margaret Archer and Jürgen Habermas, Norbert Wiley’s innovative appropriation of central themes in American pragmatism enables social theory to put the complex contributions of the classical pragmatist to creative work. I cannot imagine a more appropriate way to honor the tradition of pragmatism than to put it to the kind of work Wiley’s writings not only so richly suggest but also painstakingly carry out. If my reading of pragmatism has been orthogonal to Wiley’s own, it might suggest yet other ways of carrying out the task to which he and I are committed. And what better way is there of honoring the work of one from whom I have learned so much?

References

- Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1967). *John Dewey*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1971). *Praxis and action*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Colapietro, V. (1989). *Peirce’s approach to the self*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Colapietro, V. (1990). The vanishing subject of contemporary philosophy. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 644-55.
- Colapietro, V. (1996). Peircean reflections on gendered subjects. In C. W. Spinks and J. Deely (Eds.), *Semiotics 1995* (pp. 179-188). New York: Peter Lang.
- Colapietro, V. (1997). The dynamical object and the deliberative subject. In J. Brunning and P. Forster (Eds.), *The rule of reason: The philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce* (pp. 262-288). Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Colapietro, V. (2004). Signs and their vicissitude: Meaning in excess of consciousness and functionality. *Semiotica*, 148, 229-43.

- Delaney, C. F. (1973). C. S. Peirce's critique of foundationalism. *The Monist*, 73, 240-51.
- Descartes, R. (1996). *Meditations on first philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1988). *The collected works of John Dewey. The later works, 1925-1953. Vol. 1. Experience and nature*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press. (Work originally published 1925)
- Fisch, M. H. (1986). *Peirce, semeiotic, and pragmatism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Halton, E. (1986). *Meaning and modernity: Social theory in the pragmatic attitude*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Halton, E. (1997). *Bereft of reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Hanson, Karen. (1994). Some Peircean puzzles about the self. In E. C. Moore and R. S. Robin (Eds.), *From time and chance to consciousness* (pp. 237-246). Providence, RI: Berg
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York: Harper and Row.
- James, W. (2005). *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Joas, H. (1993). *Pragmatism and social theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Joas, H. (1997). *The creativity of action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rorty, R. (1961). Pragmatism, categories, and language. *Philosophical Review*, 70, 197-223.
- Savan, D. (1987-88). *An introduction to C. S. Peirce's full system of semeiotic*. Toronto, Ontario: Toronto Semiotic Circle.
- Sellars, W. (1997). *Empiricism and the philosophy of mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shapiro, M. (1983). *The sense of grammar: Language as semeiotic*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Short, T. L. (2005). The development of Peirce's theory of signs. In C. Misak (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Peirce* (pp. 214-240). New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Smith, J. E. (1984). *Purpose and thought: The meaning of pragmatism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, John E. (1992). *America's philosophical vision*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, C. (1997). *Philosophical arguments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

PRACTICE, AGENCY, & SOCIALITY

Wiley, N. (1994). *The semiotic self*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. New York: Macmillan.

