

[1973. In *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Carl F.H. Henry, ed. Washington D.C.: Canon Press.]

PRAGMATISM. See also *James, William*. Pragmatism is an epistemological theory initiated by William, James, thorough a misunderstanding of Peirce, advanced by F.C.S. Schiller, and most consistently developed under the name of Instrumentalism by John Dewey (q.v.).

James held that the meaning of a concept is determined by the practical consequences of accepting it; and a theory is true if it works successfully to our liking. Because James varies his expressions and may not be entirely consistent, two difficulties emerge.

First, James seems always to consider the problem to be solved as one's personal, individual problem. This tends to make truth subjective. I choose my problem, you choose yours; our theories then may be formally contradictory, but since we each succeed, both theories are true.

James indeed tried to limit choices to what a healthy-minded activist would prefer; he deprecated "morbid minds... Buddhists... who are afraid of life." But this exception is an inconsistency. If belief in nirvana gets the Buddhists what he wants- not what James wants- this belief on pragmatic principles must be as true as any other.

F.C.S. Schiller, followed by John Dewey, avoided the individualism by making truth a social product. Buddhists who disagree with society are insane or sick. No matter how grotesque the formal fallacy of a theory may be, it is true if it advances the interest of an optimistic society. Pessimists are evil. Pessimism cannot be refuted logically, but it is false because it conflicts with social opinion.

Dewey also made society rather than the individual the test of truth; but this more important advance lays bare the second difficulty in James's several statements. "Is it meant," asks Dewey, "that when we take the intellectualistic notion and employ it, it gets value in the way of results, and hence has some value of its own; or is it meant that the intellectual concept itself must be determined in terms of changes effected in the ordering of life's thicket?" (*Essays in Experimental Logic*, Magnolia, Mass., Smith, pp. 312-316).

That the content of a concept consists of certain future actions makes ideas anticipatory plans. A law of science is not a statement of some antecedent condition: it is a plan for getting a desired result. An historical proposition does not signify any event in the past: its meaning is the future consequences in our actions.

That the content of a concept is actions at all is a behavioristic theory of truth. To remove all doubt Dewey says, "Habits formed in the process of exercising biological aptitudes are the sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight and judgment: a mind or consciousness or soul in general which performs these operations is a myth... knowledge... lives in the muscles, not in consciousness." (*Human Nature and Conduct*, New York, Modern Library, 1930, III I; cf. I vi; *Quest for Certainty*, New York, Putnam, pp. 86,166).

This statement that knowledge lives in the muscles is not complete. Elsewhere Dewey says, "Although the psychological theory involved is a form of behaviorism... behavior is not viewed as something taking place in the nervous system or under the skin of an organism, but always, directly or indirectly, in obvious overtness or at a distance through a number of intervening links, and interaction with environing conditions" (*The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Schilpp, ed., p. 555). Thus thinking is, literally, the interacting motions of a distant object and one's biceps or Achilles tendon.

Since physical bodies are constantly changing, since also men's problems and plans to do so too, it follows that behaviorism disallows all fixed truth. This includes the logical principles of identity, contradiction, and excluded middle. Such principles are generated in action and change with action (*Logic*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1938, pp. 11-12; cf. *Philosophy and Civilization*, Magnolia, Mass., Smith, p. 129). The laws of logic are like civil laws on contract: they change. Accordingly one must be prepared eventually to abandon the law of contradiction (*Logic*, pp. 16-17, 102, 120, 372ff., 391).

In this Pragmatism meets its doom. The law of contradiction (and identity) requires a term to bear a single meaning throughout an argument. But if the term *muscle* in Dewey's argument can also mean soul, mind, and spirit, the conclusion will not be to his liking. He has built up his theory by arguments based on Aristotelian logic. He insists on his conclusions not only because he thinks that his premises are true, but also because

his inferences are valid. Soon, however, society will have evolved to a non-aristotelian logic, and the logic Dewey used will be false. But if his logic is false, Pragmatism has no defense.

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