

**PRAGMATISM.**  
**SOME NEW WAYS OF THINKING FOR AN OLD NAME**

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Introduction\*  
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There is today a renewed interest worldwide in pragmatism. In Europe, in particular, consideration of pragmatist issues and their integration with themes from mainstream logical analysis, cognitivism, criticism and semiotics is now well established in many research centers, which periodically hold conferences on the questions raised. Throughout the whole of 2014, centennial year of the death of Charles Sanders Peirce, a series of conferences were held and monographs published on the work of the great American philosopher, the founder of semiotics and pragmatism<sup>1</sup>. The following year saw the second European Conference on Pragmatism, held in Paris and attended by many scholars from all over the globe, and a three-day workshop at Gargnano del Garda, Italy, organized by the Università degli Studi di Milano and the Institut Universitaire de France, which addressed the relationship between pragmatism and evolutionism<sup>2</sup>. Lastly, as simply a reminder of the many events taking place in connection with the authors in this tradition, there is the collective volume *Il pragmatismo. Dalle origini agli sviluppi contemporanei* recently published by Carocci. Edited by several members of the Italian Pragmatist Association («Associazione Pragma») it gives a brief history of the themes,

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1. I recall in Italian only two volumes, published recently, issuing from two different conferences: *Su Peirce. Interpretazioni, ricerche, prospettive* (Bonfantini, Fabbrichesi and Zingale, 2015), and a monograph on the same philosopher consisting of 35 various articles, put out by «Rivista di Filosofia del Linguaggio» (special issue, edited by Claudio Paolucci and Paolo Leonardi, 2015).

2. The conference was entitled «James, Bergson, Dewey. Dal biologico al politico [James, Bergson, Dewey. From the biological to the political]»; the scientific committee was composed of Barbara Stiegler and myself. The Acts are forthcoming from the publisher Hermann (Paris). Among recent initiatives, I also recall the volume *Nuovi usi di vecchi concetti. Il metodo pragmatista oggi* (Striano, Oliverio and Santarelli, 2015) which collects the acts of another conference held at Rome University in 2014.

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issues and most important authors in this school of thought (Calcaterra, Maddalena and Marchetti, 2015).

This brief *excursus* suffices to highlight the fact that, as William James recalled, pragmatism has «come to stay». Its ideas, belittled and scorned during the early 1900s as a “Yankee” philosophy lacking in depth – the trenchant judgment of Bertrand Russell – have exhibited a solid kernel, fed by a highly refined and innovative logic (I have in mind Peirce and Josiah Royce) and by what was not normally found in other European philosophical circles, namely an interest in social, civil and pedagogic (John Dewey and George H. Mead) as well as psychological (James) or esthetic (Dewey) aspects.

The attention paid by classic pragmatists to the study of signs and language, consciousness and its genealogy, sensory-motor activity and cognition “in act” has given birth to some re-elaborations that have made a big impact in the contemporary age. As I see it, it is not by chance that it is now the students of semiotics, mind sciences, neurosciences, philosophy of language and cognitive psychology who are displaying a renewed interest in the pragmatist tradition with a view to probing its intuitions and, in some cases, applying them even in experimental research. But the combinations they propose are often improvised, at times weakly supported by adequate interpretation and subject to the objectives of the day. In other words, the breadth of the theoretical and philosophical elaboration by this current, which has provided an authentic original vision of the world, has not always been grasped.

The decision to dedicate a monographic issue of «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia» to pragmatism has a precise intention. The aim is, of course, to point out the debt that many of the new interpretive approaches spanning science and philosophy owe to this tradition. However, what is to be analyzed first and foremost is the path by which the classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, Royce, Mead, Dewey) succeeded in going beyond a particular philosophical vision imported from Europe and opening up a totally original perspective. It must be remembered that pragmatist thinking has turned out to be especially innovative in exploring some tricky questions; for example, that concerning the nature of theoretical practice in its condition as an operational praxis able to direct activity in our environment-world, or the interpretation of ideas as plans for action and of the concept as carrier of meaning in relation to the conceivable effects that flow from it. Moreover, the emphasis needs to be underlined that many pragmatists place on the centrality of practices and of gestures in the working of cognition, thereby greatly reducing the importance of reference to acts of consciousness, to the transcendental, and to subjectivity detached from the subject’s own concrete operations. This entails many of them focusing on sign inferences and symbolic references. In short, what we see is a constellation of theoretical nodes emerging between the second half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s thanks to the work of these scarcely academic philosophers – Peirce was a chemist and logician, James a physiologist and psychologist – whose thought does not yet seem to have exhausted its intellectual drive.

I will, then, use this introduction to summarize the elements that, in my view, impart a particular value to this philosophical tradition and enable it today to be “competitive” in its handling of several conceptual constructions at the center of contemporary investigation.

First of all, pragmatism has reshaped the notions of meaning and truth, making it clear that there is no truth outside of the practices enacted to attain what is true, that is outside of the beliefs that lead to the reinforcement of certain habits rather than others. The heart of the matter for pragmatism is not *truth*, but the *effects* of truth, the outcomes that follow from holding a concept to be true, that is meaningful, and putting it to work. Peirce’s maxim says: *the meaning of an event is equivalent to the effects to which it could give rise*. The kernel of the “pragmatistic turn” lies in no longer conceiving of truth, reality, experience as original facts and assumptions as absolute, but as the result of a semiotic long run, a gradual and selective occurrence of effective interpretations within a certain working context. I will mention here only briefly that this reading owes a great deal to the evolutionist context, within which all the pragmatists formed their own ideas, and that Henri Bergson was the first to point to this aspect as the keystone of the hoped-for *philosophie nouvelle* that was expected to feed on the intersecting studies carried out by himself and his friend William James<sup>3</sup>. For pragmatism, truth is not a discovery, it is an invention – he noted – and, as James stated, reality «is still in the making, and *awaits part of its complexion from the future*» (James 1975, p. 123). In other words, the rational habit consists in the desire to see cognition at work, to achieve results that are not «stationary» (Peirce *CP* 1.614) but that bolster one another through the growing power of the effects of truth issuing from one’s beliefs and actions. So, it could be said that for pragmatists “*facts*” are stationary, “*reals*” are in the making, in progress.

From this ensues the value attributed in this tradition to the future and conditional dimension, which resets what has happened by recalculating on the basis of the outcome its original given dimension. This position, too, has an extensive revolutionary scope. The theme of the origin, stored in the casket of much metaphysics, is completely undermined, and the same applies to the themes relating to the intention of the actor, to final or efficient causes, and to systematic principles, with all the consequences that follow in terms of values. To disaffirm the importance of origins – since the origin is always, so to speak, a retroactive effect of the thought that authoritatively sets it in a certain place at a certain time – means to greatly diminish intentionality, choice, will; in short, the entire arsenal of consciousness and subjective introspection. Clearly, not all the occupants in the pragmatist «rooms»<sup>4</sup> think in this way, but if one

3. See on this point the exchange of letters between the two thinkers recently translated into Italian (Bergson, James 2014).

4. Referring to a passage in Papini, James likens the pragmatist attitude to a hotel corridor in which there are many rooms, in each of which lives a thinker who, also in a different way, uses the same method: «But they all own the corridor, and all must pass

draws the most radical conclusions from this theoretical exercise and thinks about it in connection with some of the most original current hypotheses in philosophy, then this appears to be a crucial element on which to reflect with an open mind.

It is indeed, I believe, to the pragmatists that we owe a slippage in the treatment of the “place” of consciousness that leads them to transfer it from the inwardness of the mind to the practices in progress in which something like self-awareness emerges. And that occurs precisely in virtue of the assimilation of Charles Darwin’s lesson. It is only by starting from the evolutionist hypothesis that it is possible to pose the problem of the *origin* of consciousness and its interpretation as an outcome of past habits<sup>5</sup>. From this perspective, there is no need to assume the “exceptional” presence of something purely human definable as consciousness, self-consciousness or mind around which all the other faculties revolve. Analogous with the other living beings, man is explained as a being endowed with the capacity for habit-taking and self-consciousness is put down to an evolutionary jump in which there is simply a selection of accidental variations due to vocal gestures and manipulation of signs, gradually adopted for new social and communicative uses.

In this framework, Peirce demonstrates that we have no capacity for introspection and the mind is merely an external sign; James comes to negate the existence of an «entity» called consciousness; Dewey replaces the notion of mental idea with that of act; and Mead holds internalization to be a complex process consequent upon the socialization of gestures. Such a new and revolutionary approach was marginalized by twentieth-century thinking, which did not set much store by it; consciousness, indeed, reigned supreme in the territories of contemporary philosophy and did so with those features of constitutive consciousness, transcendental or authentically pure, that had been on the march since the Cartesian *cogito*. From Peirce to Mead, pragmatism reiterates instead, in different forms, that consciousness has no constitutive character in building knowledge, has no conceptual priority and not even, on close inspection, psychological centrality.

For the pragmatists, there is rather another key idea, which defines the dimensions of the cognitive act and, at the same time, of dealings with the world: this idea is that of habit. It demolishes the traditional dualistic definition of philosophical thought. Habit traces out the territory preceding the distinction between physical and mental, unconscious and conscious. Taken

through it if they want a practical way of getting into or out of their respective room» (James 1975, p. 32). The theme of the will is evidently at the center of James’s research, which would however – as is well known – towards the end of his life be highly critical of the consciousness-based framework of philosophical enquiry.

5. Undoubtedly, the interest of Peirce and James in the theme of consciousness is linked to the discussions in the «Metaphysical Club» of Cambridge with Chauncey Wright, an important intermediary between Darwinism and pragmatism (see on this point Parravicini, 2012).

from empiricist reflection, it simply denotes a model of behavior that is recurrent, habitual, often unaware and, however, in its own way “wise”, sustained by the practices that determine it. Habit signals the presence of the living being and its role within nature, but it can be extended also to the inorganic: a river takes on the habit of eroding rocks, a plant of capturing sunlight, while the human being adopts general habits that become guiding principles of inference. Habit is simply the propensity to act, the attitude of responding. It is a non-mental and non-voluntary disposition: a knowhow that can be extended to the whole environment because it simply amounts to the «tendency actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future» (Peirce *CP* 5.480). It is the true *general*, that which identifies at the same time the meaningful proposition and the act that translates it into behavior. The meaning of a concept, its Final Logical Interpretant, says in fact Peirce, is a habit of response. The reflex arc between stimulus and response, Dewey adds, is best represented by the idea of a continuous circuit condensed in the act. It is not, therefore, a question of associating, one after the other, sensory stimulus, central connections and motor responses in order to attain the sense of behavior. It is simply a matter of looking at the coordination of experiences that are produced at the level of habit of action. Mead would then perfect this idea by interpreting the role of “habitual” act in a social sense. Not only is the act as a whole already present in determining the process of perception and manipulation and not only is the adoption of a meaning equivalent to the freeing of a series of consequent responses, but the act is inevitably social, never individual, and it is accomplished starting from a conversation of gestures.

It is evident, then, that we are here on a ridge where the old sensation-intellection, praxis-theory, private-public dualism teeters before falling. Ideas are fit instruments for achieving a more effective intervention in the world and have value if incorporated into living practices. The horizon of the mental and the representational no longer governs the theory of meanings. Put more simply, interpretation is never an intellectual state; it is a being ready to act in a context of social actions.

On the basis of the centrality given to the observation of habits, pragmatism can thus be defined as a theory of experience, of pure experience (as James wanted). An experience in which, as we have seen, the attempt is made to rectify duality and preserve the fluctuating and coralline multiplicity of acts. In this sense, experience is to be understood as pure praxis: it is not therefore passive reception of perceptive data but a sequence of interrelated acts. It is identical with *having* experiences, with a constant activity of *trans-action*. Adapting to the environment means not only fitting in with its forms, but performing an activity such as to enable changes to go in a new direction, setting in motion – as Chauncey Wright explained – «new uses of old powers»<sup>6</sup>. This principle, greatly valued also by Darwin, is based on the slow,

6. «The truth is, on the contrary, that according to the theory of evolution, new uses of

but at times radical transformation of habits (take the famous example of a bird's wings, which turned from heat-regulating mechanisms into devices enabling flight).

Habits are, then, from this perspective not only practices of co-adaptation between living beings and their surroundings, but also occasions for encountering, relating to and modifying "what there is". In this sense, it seems to me, pragmatism can be defined as "absolute" relationism. Indeed, for the authors in this tradition, there is nothing other than relation – no substances, no predefined forms, and even less so ties of discrete association between them – and this applies to the encounter with both the environment and other human beings in the construction of social communities of belonging.

It is well known that in this case, too, it was Peirce who initiated reflection. In his writings of 1868 he firmly asserts that «the very origin of the conception of reality» (Peirce *W* 2.239) necessarily implies the notion of a community of reference, without definite limits and with the capacity for an indefinite increase of knowledge. The belief in reality ("the" reality or the particular "realities") is consolidated in a habit of general and public response, which is confirmed as long as it produces significant effects in the order of rationality and of consistency of behaviors. It is thus an «event indefinitely future» (Peirce *W* 2.252), a result configured by the different modes of action developed within consolidated practices. James echoes this view: for the rationalist reality is already given and complete *ab aeterno*, an *edition de luxe*, while for the pragmatist it awaits its general character from the future and is still pursuing its adventure (James 1975, p. 123). The directions it will take do not depend on individual initiative, but on the concrescence of truths formulated in common along a path not without gaps and deviations.

In this case also pragmatist thought tends to demolish all dualism. It is not a matter of distinguishing individual and society, private and public truths, but of considering man as a sign that refers to other signs in an infinite semiosis, in which communal ties are those within which this or that different form of humanity emerges. For Peirce man has a «glassy essence» (Peirce *W* 2.242), which means that he becomes what he is in the *mirror* of the relations he engages in with others, but also in the *transparency* of his individual make-up, which should be understood as a mere hub through which continuously different traces transit. So there is not "man"; there is the sign relation that infinitely refers to the interpretant practices that define the use of that sign "man". There is man as hub and interchange of infinite relations; man as the set of his social relations (here one could consider the many analogies with Karl Marx's philosophy of praxis)<sup>7</sup>. By adhering to the pragmatist project one refrains from choosing between the liberal and communitarian assumption,

old powers arise discontinuously both in the bodily and mental natures of the animal, and in its individual developments, as well as in the development of its race, although, at their rise, these uses are small and of the smallest importance to life» (Wright 2000, pp.199-200).

7. I have dwelt on this point at greater length in Fabbrichesi 2015.

taking the side of the individual or the multitude, supporting the freedom of the individual or the need for societal restrictions. Rather, what one does is to reason from the starting-point of the continuity of public practices and communal habits. In the studies of Peirce, James and Dewey, the subject becomes a fluctuating, fallible, relational, and adaptive identity that constitutes itself there where it acts and produces effects, which are first of all social; that is, there where identity *makes* itself plural, transactional.

In this sense, we can go back to the centrality of the notion of habit of response; the “common” of which the pragmatist schools talk is something that belongs in the first place and for the most part to habit, which is never exactly mine, or yours, but is precisely of all and each one, as Hegel would say. Habit is always communal: it is the set of practices and beliefs that identify the “making humanity” of each one of us. There is no idea that is not defined praxeologically in terms of belief, that is habit of action; namely, again, response to the environment on a public and social basis. Habit is never individual but always individuated, *here and now*; it is a *general* that becomes fixed through its repeated occurrences and eliminated by competitive varieties imposing themselves. As I see it, from the perspective of a refined realism this formulation of a close interlacing between the generality of habit and the value of community is significant. Peirce in fact says that embracing the synechist (continuist) and realist hypothesis means abandoning as sterile metaphysics nominalist, atomist, individualist and associationist approaches. As long as one sticks to the atomist approach and reasons in terms of a single life, individual aspirations and momentary wellbeing, one is unable to evaluate process. Yet, only process is real; only *generals* have reality, in the medieval-scholastic sense of the word (expressing himself in this way, Peirce parts company with James and perhaps with the other companions of the pragmatist adventure). In the political domain, this means that every one of our actions must be inspired by a communal principle, *precisely to bolster our contingent individual emergency*. Common is that which in the evolution and transit of each life practice is recognized as specific to each human singleness. If men have something in common, then this common something should be seen as their deepest constitutive reality as well as an end in itself, and this abstract generality, Peirce continues, «is the most fundamental *practical* question *in regard to every public institution* the constitution of which *we have it in our power to influence*» (Peirce CP 8.38). The question of realism and nominalism has its roots in the technicalities of logic, yet its branches reach into our life.

Logic and realist semiotics are thus rooted in a social principle. This is a further element that, I believe, gives life to the structure of the pragmatist theoretical explanation and leads to effective “practical consequences”. Its metaphysics combines with an ethical and political thinking that it is as necessary as ever to investigate and reshape in the present dark times.

Let me say a few words on the title I decided to give to this issue of the Review. *Some New Ways of Thinking for an Old Name* inverts the well-known

subtitle of *Pragmatism* by William James: *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. I hope after what has been said so far that the reason for this choice is sufficiently clear.

The booklet contains the thought of some of the most representative voices on the contemporary pragmatist scene. They are among those who have always engaged in their own intellectual activity with an admirable balance between the analytical tradition (today in a dominant position also in pragmatist studies – not always justifiably so) and what we could call the Continental School (even though such a definition now seems to be a bit reductive when referring to the thousand voices that use tools and languages extraneous to the analytical and strictly epistemological tradition). Indeed, pragmatism is distinctive in that it is able to point to a “third path” between the two approaches that at present are jostling for space in philosophical research. It is a path that, having sidelined the centrality attributed to linguistic order or to the question of subjectivity, is focusing on general habits of response and the acts of communal practices.

The booklet opens with an essay by Jaime Nubiola that throws light on the origins of pragmatism by retrieving valuable historical information on the Heidelberg Conference in 1908, on the reception of the “new philosophy” in Europe and on the authors involved. Engaged in even bitter disputes with other thinkers at the Conference, these authors have become shadowy over time, starting with Royce and ending with Ferdinand C. Schiller, whose arrogance and lack of theoretical substance played no little role, according to the writer of the essay, in marginalizing the pragmatist theses for a good part of the century.

Giovanni Maddalena intervenes with authority in one of the most animated debates in current philosophy and illustrates how the reference to realism should be interpreted from a pragmatist perspective. There are today many variations on this theme, from the strictly ontological to the Kantian-derived transcendentalist, which for the most part aim to support a “scientific” vision in line with a certain analytic paradigm of research. Maddalena shirks these interpretations and goes back to the classic pragmatists, explaining in what way their writings should be freed of any intention to bend their reading along ready-made lines of interpretation.

Peirce is the author who is most helpful in a “synthetic” and non-analytical reading of pragmatism. It is to him that Fernando Zalamea looks in an essay that provides a clear reading of the system of Existential Graphs and makes them into the emblem of a thinking that is plastic, topological, visual, imaginative and abductive. Peirce uses the graphs as a system of diagrammatic writing able to repropose each conceptual analysis without subscribing to the myth of crystalline clarity guaranteed by a syntactical and logical-deductive system, but, precisely, choosing a visual and geometrical form that can combine art and science thanks to a refined «topology of transits».

It is also to Peirce that Vincent Colapietro turns in his reconstruction of a philosophy of time that proceeds from an attentive reading of the categories



formulated by the American philosopher. In 1905, Peirce decided to treat the question of time within the illustration of the arguments of pragmatism, that is his own version of pragmatism alternative to that of James and many others. Colapietro clearly shows that the Peircean analysis of temporality cannot be viewed only in the light of synechism but has to be interpreted starting from the notions of rupture and alterity. It is significant that the last part of the essay is dedicated to trauma.

Ivo Assad Ibri also addresses the question of time, starting with Peirce and taking up in his essay some arguments against an outworn realism understood as correspondentism. However, of interest here is the genetic aspect, which enables one to explain both the order and continuity of temporal phenomena and their abrupt discontinuity. All of this should be set in relation to the essentiality of habits, in their positive aspect (that is, in their functioning as guide to future conduct) as well as in their negative aspect (when they interrupt continuity through their irregularity).

Next come two substantial interventions regarding James's work. First, after pointing up the unity – I might even say architectonic style – of the theoretical framework that is shared by all the pragmatist “rooms”, Rosa Calcaterra focuses on James's ethics showing that the dimension of values, with its inevitably political repercussions, lies at the center of the author's reflections and that, on ploughing these terrains, James is able to remain faithful to Darwinian inspiration by carrying out the transposition of the biological principle of indetermination onto the epistemic and ethical level.

The next essay, by Stéphane Madelrieux, puts forward a radical interpretation of the Jamesian “will to believe” with the aim of detaching it from theist and, in general, religious references. He stresses the particular nature of the pragmatist proposal, which is to be understood as an *attitude* of thinking in a certain way – and not as a doctrine or scientific method – and proposes that the will to believe be interpreted simply as a way to resolve the most complex philosophical dilemmas.

The last essay is on Dewey. Robert Innis, who has dedicated throughout his long career many writings to the pragmatists, chooses to dwell on the influence that Samuel Alexander, the author of *Space, Time, Deity* (1920), exerted on Dewey's work especially with regard to the reflection on esthetics seen from the pragmatist standpoint. Innis demonstrates that in the 1930s Dewey came across at least two of Alexander's writings, *Art and the Material* and *Artistic Creation and Cosmic Creation*, and used them in his project to create a naturalist esthetics, which culminated in the book *Art as Experience*.

Finally, the booklet ends with some important observations of a theoretical nature by Carlo Sini, author forty years ago of the pioneering *Il pragmatismo americano* (1972), which introduced into Italy the thought of Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead and contributed to its successful merging with phenomenology, hermeneutics, and philosophical semiotics. Posing the question as to how the historical contribution of pragmatism is to be evaluated with respect to the philosophical tradition, he concludes that the “truth” of this

current of thought could not be made the object of research without referring to the fact that those who assume it to be so are, pragmatically, a consequence of its action and its theoretical formulation, rooted in precise experiential practices.

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