

*Philosophy Insights*  
General Editor: Mark Addis

# Classical American Pragmatism

*Martin A. Bertman*

# PUBLICATION DATA

© Martin A. Bertman, 2007

The Author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by *Humanities-Ebooks.co.uk*  
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

## READING OPTIONS

- \* Before continuing, please use the command 'View > fit to page' and then progress by using the 'next page' arrows at the top or bottom right of the Viewer screen.
- \* To navigate through the contents use the 'Bookmarks' at the left of the screen.
- \* To search, click on the search symbol in the toolbar and select 'show all results'.
- \* For ease of reading, use <CTRL+L> to enlarge the page to full screen
- \* Use <CTRL+L> to return to the full menu, with its bookmarks and search tool.
- \* Hyperlinks (if any) appear in Blue Underlined Text.

## LICENCE AND PERMISSIONS

This book is licensed for a particular computer or computers. The file itself may be copied, but the copy will not open until the new user obtains a licence from the Humanities-Ebooks website in the usual manner. The original purchaser may license the same work for a second computer by applying to [support@humanities-ebooks.co.uk](mailto:support@humanities-ebooks.co.uk) with proof of purchase.

Permissions: it is permissible to print one (watermarked) copy of the book for your own use, but not to copy and paste text.

ISBN 978-1-84760-025-7

# *Classical American Pragmatism*

Martin A. Bertman

## A Note on the Author

---

Martin A. Bertman PhD is Docent Emeritus of the University of Helsinki where he has taught for 15 years. He was educated at Syracuse, Columbia and Princeton Universities. He is President of the International Hobbes Association and Editor-in-Chief of *Hobbes Studies* a journal he founded in 1988. He has been a guest editor for several other journals. He has published six books and 75 articles on philosophical subjects, primarily in modern philosophy, including the subject of this book. He has taught semesters in France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, and Germany, and in the USA, he has taught at the State University of New York for 20 years and has been National Endowment of the Humanities Professor at Scranton University and Distinguished Visiting Professor at two California State Universities. Now he teaches at Akron University. He can be reached at [mabertman@yahoo.com](mailto:mabertman@yahoo.com).

# **Contents**

---

**1. Overview of Classical Pragmatism**

**2. Pierce on Belief**

**3. Pierce on Feeling and Metaphysics**

**4. James on Consciousness and Truth**

**5. Dewey on Society**

**6. Dewey: Experience and Pragmatism**

**7. Conclusion: Dewey on Pierce and James**

**Bibliography**

# 1 Overview of Classical Pragmatism

---

The three classical pragmatists of this essay are Charles Sanders Pierce (1836–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952). Though their doctrines have some substantial divergences, these three share enough of an intellectual atmosphere, particularly a commitment to experience measured by effectiveness in solving felt difficulties. The classical pragmatists are Americans and, in pragmatic thinking, their American culture is an admittedly determinative factor for their doctrines, especially, and more broadly, the scientific culture of the day. For pragmatists, natural and social conditions and instruments of knowing constitute a contextual web needing an intelligent response because of the limits they impose on progress.

Before discussing the theoretical details, the professional background of our three pragmatists is noted and, then, some intellectual currents of their cultural context. James had a medical degree and was a psychologist by profession teaching that and philosophy at Harvard. Dewey taught in departments of Psychology, Education and Philosophy but preferred to call himself an anthropologist, emphasizing his belief in the importance of cultural experience for inquiry. Unlike James and Dewey, Pierce had much experience as a scientist. His early focus was on the method of appropriate inquiry, which influenced James and Dewey; later he wrote more speculatively. His scant academic teaching was at Johns Hopkins for a few years, where Dewey and the outstanding sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, were his students.

Primarily because of these three, with the addition of two outstanding colleagues of James, Josiah Royce and George Santayana, Charles Frankel (1960) calls the period of 1870–1930 the ‘Golden Age of American Philosophy’. In this era, influenced by European philosophy since the seventeenth century, the basal cultural energies arose from the sin-haunted Puritanism of Cotton Mather and Jeremy Edwards<sup>1</sup>, Lockean

---

1 Cf. Craig R. Eisendrath, *The Unifying Moment* (Harvard: 1971) 213–4: ‘One sees in James a profound loneliness. ... The curious mixture of love and isolation that one senses in the Puritan fathers, such as John Winthrop, seemed to be James’s as well. ... Pain, and death, and sin, and wrong—some might be “ministerial to a higher form of good”, but not all; there was evil that could not be gainsaid. Philosophy had to deal with it; the healthy-minded by refusing to recognize it, were denying existence its most profound elements. His flights of confidence have the desperate courage of a man whistling past a graveyard. His sermons are as much for himself as for his audience’.

Constitutional republicanism, the elusive national unity of a recent civil war, and the great resourcefulness for the ‘cultivation’ of a large slice of a continent by an immigrant absorbing nation. Among these forces was tension among opposing capitalist economic and reformist social policy. Yet, in the depth of the cultural current there was an energy and optimism. The signal American poet, Walt Whitman, a favourite of William James, recognizes a poetic rainbow of tensions and, in the brash manner of his national optimism, said, ‘If I contradict, then I contradict, and the hell with it’. James’s phrase ‘let all doors open outward’ has the forward-looking optimism of Whitman.

Yet even when the philosophical task professes openness to experience, with its gritty moil and toil, it does not quite have the poetic heart to say, ‘The hell with contradiction.’ For the pragmatist, contradiction signals the intellectual challenge for its resolution; at the least, the fire of a plausible method must burn the dross of idiosyncratic and mistaken assumptions, the baggage of the historical current. In the earliest moment for the formation of the pragmatic doctrines, such philosophic discussion occurred under the leadership of Chauncey Wright (1830–1875), a philosopher who published little. This Metaphysical Club at Harvard had among its member the future Justice of the Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as James and Pierce.

Wright influenced James and Pierce’s pragmatism by emphasizing the difficulty of a single and unified philosophical vision; he wrote, ‘The questions of philosophy proper are human desires, fears, and aspirations—human emotions—taking an intellectual form’. Furthermore (1877) ‘Theories, it is true are facts, —a particular class of facts indeed, generally complex ones, but still facts’. Pragmatism validates theory by the ‘cash value’ of its effect and, takes it, once established, as an instrument of action. Wright says (Schneider, 1963):

Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects, and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves and mistake a mere sensation accompanying a thought for part of the thought itself. It is absurd to say that thought has any function unrelated to its only function’ [to organize sensible effects.]

In response to this, Pierce and James reflect the different gravitational pulls within Pragmatism: in his early methodological writings, Pierce is particularly concerned with the logical and technical boundaries for fixing belief for action, which later gives way to an evolutionary metaphysics whereas James is most sensitive to the self as a physiological organism that projects emotively driven agendas in a cultural orientation to achieve stability for action and a pleasing self-awareness. James is sensitive

to the individual dealing with intractable questions about the human condition: the questions of ‘existence’ that religion ‘solves’. Such thoughts provoke emotional disturbances beyond a possible explanation by a natural or scientific solution.

Pierce inquiry is oriented to observation; he focuses on science’s characteristic of public repetitions of experiments, under ‘leading principles,’ for the paradigm of rational method. This empirical orientation is continued in Dewey. Dewey (1938) writes:

I follow in the main the account given by Pierce of guiding or leading principles. According to this view, every inferential conclusion that is drawn involves a habit in the *organic* sense of habit since, since life is impossible without ways of action sufficiently general to be properly named habits.

For Pierce, meaningful concepts are derivative signs of observed phenomena. By the antipode of pragmatism, James’s mind constantly returns to the moral burdens of being human. Ultimately, these concerns do not necessarily lead to disruption, certainly Dewey, the ‘public intellectual’, is intent on having them united. Yet, the mood of Pierce and James is different and their antipodal gravitational pull makes for different approach, to use Dewey’s phrase, ‘to the difficulties of men.’

Adapting themes from both, Dewey’s interest in inquiry is proactive by engaging his estimate of the social and political context. Unwavering in his commitment to naturalism, the social order is an instrument of individual welfare and the individual is an instrument of social order. He sometimes calls his thinking instrumentalism, and he emphasizes its character by attaching the word ‘humanism’; however, he is not overly interested in stressing such tags. What he wishes to emphasize is interchange between present awareness and a positive reconstruction or flourishing of human contexts to overcome disharmony between society and individual. The two are inseparable in their actual ‘transaction’, when not divided for the sake of some analytical purpose. This holistic transaction’s evolutionary energy arises from inward tension, as well as new circumstances, including tools, for problem solving. Aside from an early Hegelian idealism—he considered himself Hegelian until 1893—that has left its trace, the mature Dewey is deeply and constantly influenced by biological thinking: Aristotle’s functionalism and Darwin’s evolutionary doctrine.

Darwin is in the air. Especially Herbert Spencer in England, a now too neglected thinker, presents evolution as the ground of social thinking; unlike Spencer’s mechanical view of nature, Henri Bergson’s understanding of evolution finds appropriateness in intuitive harmony (*élan*), which opposes cookie cutter principles or mechanical

determinants (*raideur mécanique*); for him, the stuff of comedic exaggeration. In capitalist America, an important cultural attitude finds Darwin's natural struggle concept capable of justifying greed and social ugliness; to use Dewey's phrase, this is 'ragged rather than rugged individualism'. This doctrine of social progress applauds striving, but with narrow self-interest. In it, chance and providence play tag like in the theological economics of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'.

Both Pierce and Dewey were critical of this sort of justification of greed. Particularly, Dewey's 'public intellectual' impulse is for progress and social health to occur by solving social disharmonies, especially by new legislation and associations. He encouraged social corporations like trade unions—he was influential in founding the American Association of College Professors—and was committed to refurbished social habits and intentions through education. Education is necessary for ingenuity and community loyalty for Dewey's 'social intelligence', the repository of intellectual power to solve problems.

Since the individual is not aside from social context, a healthy social context is necessary for action enhancing the good of the individual. Recall Aristotle's remark that notes context: 'The good citizen and the good man are not the same, except in the best state (*polis*)'. After Darwin, Dewey does not have Aristotle's specie fixed ontology of human nature, expressed in the final form of a social order in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Dewey sees the social context in the 'historical current' but as evolving without a fixed goal; human nature is flexible despite having certain physical needs that influence goals. Constructive social ingenuity is foremost: the functionalism impulse in Dewey embraces Pierce's 'temporarily' or hypothetically fixed beliefs and James's attempt to achieve stability. Consequently, for Dewey, institutional structures, governmental and non-governmental, and education can be useful to bolster communal loyalty. The historical current has its moment of ideology and institutional tools to overcome social chaos and individual inclinations toward anti-social behaviour. Dewey broadly shares with Aristotle and Hegel an ecological view of the individual within the niche provided by community.

The focus of Dewey's view of logic is the conditions of action; this broadens as it incorporates Pierce's experimental method. In a cultural mode, the pragmatists connect science and technology to the self-image of Americans as a 'can-do' society. The cultural implication is striving for the better. Unlike pragmatism, many absolutist metaphysical systems stress a complete and unchanging doctrine of human nature and political maturity. Pragmatism finds such metaphysical doctrines unresponsive to actual life. Pragmatic social strategies are closer to tactics than absolute metaphysics

fixed social goals. In 'Fixation of Belief' (1957) Pierce calls absolute metaphysical theories 'systems rummaging the garret of the skull to find an enduring opinion about the universe'.

Pierce and Dewey's attraction to scientific method contends against the absolute fixity of an abstract system that does not engage the continuance of concrete actual difficulties. Science is not only empirical, in addition, it is 'open ended,' cooperative, and transparent about conclusions. From German romanticism and idealism the aesthetic attitude drove social and philosophical thinking in America, in the formative period of pragmatism and to some extent produced approaches that the pragmatic inclination to the concrete opposes. Unlike the artwork, a scientific product is not uniquely personal at its core, e.g. the presence in a Leonardo painting of his personality, toned in a cultural moment, but a communal endeavour. Achievements of even great scientists, say Newton and Archimedes, become submerged in the stream of an unending advancement of their fields. Dewey emphasizes one cannot reach any conclusion about a final 'real', and science is an instrument of policy at an historical moment of knowing, which is an aspect of actuality.

The 'real' in the history of philosophy moves one to order thinking under some sort of characterization of reason or, perhaps contrariwise, the reasonable. This moment is captured in Plato's confrontation with sophistic humanism. Pragmatism is inclined to collapse the rational into the reasonable: to give the rational to a method of inquiry and the reasonable to the relative but actual or concrete condition for employing knowledge. Pragmatic knowing is an instrument of interests rather than absolute metaphysics.

However, truth is a fixed rational real for Pierce; his metaphysical theory is a speculative supplement to his pragmatism. It deals with evolving laws presenting 'generals' or universals for consciousness. On the other hand, in classifying them with the scholastic realist and nominalist tags, James is a sort of nominalist. For James truth is a reasonable construction of experiential longing seeking satisfaction; James's view of truth, however, finds internecine objections, by its emphasis on personal psychology. This subjectivist posture opposes Pierce's realist posture, an ideal worked towards truth, corresponds to an objective order. For both Pierce and Dewey the instrument of asserting truth is hypothetical in the mode of scientific inquiry.

By his realist metaphysics, Pierce is close to the absolutist tradition, though his belief in the evolution of natural law considers chance a factor of reality: natural laws are thus not fixed but develop with conditions of change. Yet, this belief in chance is perhaps not consistently in harmony with Pierce's further view of the 'asymptotic