

*The
Cambridge Companion
to*
Pragmatism

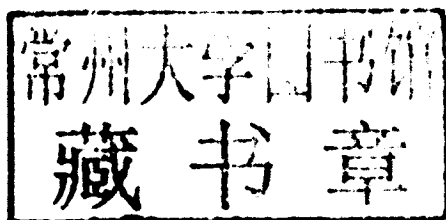


EDITED BY
ALAN MALACHOWSKI

CAMBRIDGE

The Cambridge Companion to
PRAGMATISM

Edited by Alan Malachowski



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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
PRAGMATISM

Pragmatism established a philosophical presence over a century ago through the work of Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey, and has enjoyed an unprecedented revival in recent years owing to the pioneering efforts of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. The essays in this volume explore the history and themes of classic pragmatism, discuss the revival of pragmatism, and show how it engages with a range of areas of inquiry including politics, law, education, aesthetics, religion and feminism. Together they provide readers with an overview of the richness and vitality of pragmatist thinking and the influence that it continues to exert both in philosophy and in other disciplines. The volume will be of interest to students and scholars of pragmatism, American philosophy and political theory.

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PREFACE

The publication of this collection of essays is timely. Since its inception, pragmatism has always had a noteworthy philosophical presence, but its revival in recent years has greatly increased both its historical interest and its contemporary worth. In the latter case, although pragmatism still faces stern opposition, it has once more become, to use William James's famous phrase, 'a live option'. But with timeliness comes editorial responsibility.

Pragmatism has a rich history that inspires different, and even opposing, developments and interpretations of its legacy, along with correspondingly different assessments of its prospects. Some pragmatists want to align themselves with the empiricist tradition as they see it feeding into the natural sciences. In their eyes the triangle of founding figures – Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey – has Peirce presiding at the apex. Others wish to divorce themselves from this approach, though usually on amicable terms. Their triangular image is upside down by comparison, with Peirce at the bottom and James and Dewey at level-pegging, but firmly on top. Some who prefer this ranking also want to rock the motif a bit by elevating either James or Dewey. Add the more radical inclination, encouraged by Richard Rorty, to push pragmatism to virtually autonomous limits at a point of perceived innovation, and clearly there is much scope for variation in editorial policy.

Although the strategy adopted here is outlined in the introduction, the main aim behind it is probably worth stating now. This is to provide a relatively neutral overview of pragmatism in historical terms – taking the reader from its inception through to its recent revival while, at the same time, introducing its main ideas. 'Neutral'

means without taking a stand on issues concerning the respective merits of different forms of pragmatism. This, it must be added, is editorial neutrality. The contributors are not strictly bound by it, and some have taken such a stand.

When first looking over my proposed table of contents, I had misgivings as to whether it would compromise even this kind of distanced editorial neutrality. For on the face of it, only the first three chapters, less than a third of the book, would give classic pragmatism its due. The dilemma, if it was one, could not easily be resolved. There were two practical obstacles. First, allocating more space to the founding figures would inevitably encroach on the territory covered by the *Cambridge Companions* already devoted to them. I was prepared to do that. But the second obstacle gave me pause. Since its revival, the prospects for pragmatism are very different from what they were, say, thirty years ago. This remains true even when the robustness that pragmatism manifested during its fallow period is properly acknowledged (the significance of this qualification will become clear in the introduction). Such changes in circumstances need to be catered for. Readers should be able to appreciate how pragmatism has changed and what, as a result, it has, and might, become.

Part II was therefore designed to deal with the first requirement and part III with the second. This apparently left no extra space to address my initial misgivings. However, as the project forged ahead, the dilemma was resolved in ways that I should probably have anticipated.

When pragmatism was described 'at work' in part III by the authors of the chapters on feminism, education, aesthetics, religion and law, my concerns about 'lack of balance' proved to be unfounded. In those chapters, resources from different forms of pragmatism are called upon as befits the tasks in hand. A happy pragmatic outcome. The revivalists are never ignored, but their influence is not overbearing. In this sense the reader is, after all, given a picture of pragmatism in the round.

A great many philosophers have worked hard and creatively over many years to preserve the historical integrity of pragmatist studies, develop pragmatist thought and put pragmatist ideas into practice. Though the vast majority go unrecognized here through limitations of space, I would like to dedicate this volume to their endeavours.

Interested readers should be able to track most of them down through the references, bibliography and net resources.

I am grateful to Richard Bernstein for allowing us to use his article 'Hegel and Pragmatism' for which he has copyright. This was previously published in his collection of essays entitled *The Pragmatic Turn* (Polity, 2010). I would also like to thank all the contributors for their friendly cooperation and the thoughtful work they have put into their essays. I hope readers learn as much as I did from their diverse approaches to pragmatism. I should thank Hilary Gaskin and Anna Lowe of Cambridge University Press for their courtesy, patience and professionalism in guiding this project through to completion. On a more personal note, Glen von Malachowski, my brother, has been a bastion of support over the years. His family home has provided a philosophically inspiring, safe haven on many occasions.

Finally I must thank my own family, Lesley, Jannie and Sophie, for their encouragement and love at all times. My debt to them continues to mount. I hope I will one day figure out how to repay them.

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Introduction: the pragmatist orientation

When in effect launching pragmatism in the public realm, William James claimed that it did not involve ‘particular results, but only an attitude of orientation’ – this, he said, ‘is what the pragmatist method means’. James further claimed that the method was ‘primarily’ one ‘of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable’.¹

The orientation he referred to leads ‘away from first things, principles, “categories”, supposed necessities’ and ‘towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts’.² In another take, James informed readers that pragmatists turn their ‘back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers’. These include ‘abstraction and insufficiency, verbal solutions, bad *a priori* reasons, fixed principles, closed systems and pretended absolutes and origins’. For the inclination of pragmatists is, instead, he urged, ‘towards concreteness and adequacy, facts, actions and power’, leading to ‘the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth’.³ Now, more than a century later, James’s bold characterizations still ring true. Despite the variations that have evolved during that period, they capture much of what is so attractive, interesting and intellectually vibrant about pragmatism today.

The term ‘pragmatism’ was baptised on 26 August 1898 when James addressed the Philosophical Union of the University of California at Berkeley. His talk was aptly entitled ‘Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results’. In it, James inaugurated the first popular tale of pragmatism’s origins by attributing his own renewed sense of philosophical direction to the guidance he had received some twenty years earlier from his friend Charles Sanders Peirce

and his 'principle of practicalism – or pragmatism' in particular. Peirce had expressed this principle in the following terms:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of these effects is the whole of your conception of the object.⁴

James's narrative lures us towards Peirce's famous paper 'How to Make our Ideas Clear' (1878) in which this formulation was hatched. But it also harks back to discussions that James and Peirce had with members of an informal group calling itself, 'half-ironically, half-defiantly', the Metaphysical Club, which met in Cambridge in the early 1870s.⁵ The work of one of the thinkers talked about there, the Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain, was the inspiration for Peirce's pragmatic conception of beliefs as habits of action. Further development of this particular storyline would need to uncover affinities between pragmatism and some of America's earlier philosophers as well as its ambivalent relationship to idealism and hence to thinkers further afield. This would involve some serious historical investigation.

A comprehensive, rich and authoritative history of pragmatism has yet to be written.⁶ But any adequate account must acknowledge, as we have just begun to, that it has been constituted by what Richard Bernstein calls 'contested narratives'.⁷ Though he is talking specifically about logical positivism, Gustav Bergmann captures the general characteristics that justify thinking of pragmatism as a philosophical movement in spite of this:

A philosophical movement is a group of philosophers, active over at least one or two generations, who more or less share a style, or an intellectual origin, and who have learned more from each other than they have from others, though they may, and often do, quite vigorously disagree among themselves.⁸

On the last feature, encapsulated by the Bernstein notion of contested narratives, Robert Westbrook's recent description, though over dramatic, is to the point:

Pragmatism is best conceived less as a well defined, tightly knit school of thought than as a loose, contentious family of thinkers who have always squabbled, and have sometimes been moved to disown one another.⁹

For even the trio of founding figures, Peirce, James and Dewey, who are discussed individually here in part 1, did not generally conceive