DEFENDING PRAGMATISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO CERTAIN CRITIQUES

by David M. Cheshier

Debaters forced to answer critical arguments ("critiques," "kritiks," etc. — here I'll use the former spelling) have moved through several phases of response, none of them entirely satisfactory. In the earliest days students often relied on what now seem like mundane, even absurd theoretical assertions. While the claim that critical arguments were being run in the "wrong forum" gained some traction with judges skeptical or hostile to the whole idea, it didn't take long for such very basic claims to fade out of the national circuit. As more time passed, other categories of response gained in popularity, but now those are harder to win as well; I have in mind such answers as that the criticism enacts a "performative contradiction," and the idea that affirmatives can "permute" the critique.

These are not necessarily inappropriate responses, and given certain philosophical literatures such arguments as "performative contradiction" can still carry considerable weight. On some circuits a persuasively made permutation claim can win the debate. But if only because critique debaters have acquired greater skill at responding, these positions, too, are harder to win on the affirmative.

The national circuit briefly toyed with the idea of affirmative "counter-kritiking," where the 2AC effort was made to critique the critique. So if the negative defended a Foucauldian criticism of the disci-

plinary mechanisms imbedded in the plan text or 1AC advocacy, the 2AC might reply by reading evidence from feminists who find Foucault's philosophizing politically disabling. But this has not produced much success for the affirmative, either, since in practice it proves very difficult to find a philosophical alternative that holds up against the criticism, to which the affirmative plan would not also be vulnerable. In other words, while feminists might object to the Foucauldian criticism, they'd probably hate the plan even more.

Some critique defenders glibly insist the best way to answer them is simply to engage the main philosophical literature. Thus, if the criticism indicts the "Enlightenment rationality" assumed in the solvency's "problem/solution" evidence, well then, read evidence defending the Enlightenment. If Immanuel Kant could do it, so can you. But the advice is a little disingenuous, since defenders of the caricatures of Enlightenment thought often presented in 1NC shells are hard to come by. And to defend a more nuanced version of the Enlightenment is not exactly the typical or feasible stuff of which eight-minute constructives are made.

These difficulties have led some debaters to defend other philosophical frameworks, and the point of this essay is to explain how "pragmatism" can sometimes be useful for the affirmative in critique debates as one such alternative. As you'll see, a defense of pragmatism makes the most sense as a response to certain versions of postmodern critique. On the WMD topic, that category would include most versions of what is usually called the "Spanos" critique (which references two books by William Spanos — *America's Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire* [Minnesota, 1999] and *Heidegger and Criticism: Retrieving the Cultural Politics of Destruction* [Minnesota, 1993]). But I've also seen pragmatism productively defended as a response to feminism, normativity, Foucault, and other versions of "problem/solution" and "truth/power" critiques.

All this is helped along by virtue of a recent pragmatist revival. Last year's volume on the topic by Louis Menand (*The Metaphysical Club* [Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001]) was widely reviewed and often praised as an impressive effort to historically contextualize American pragmatic philosophy. Menand also edited one of the most widely used edited collections on the topic — *Pragmatism: A Reader* (Vintage Books, 1997). But beyond Menand are dozens of recent books revisiting the pragmatist tradition and specifically exploring its relevance to contemporary intellectual trends. I cite some at the very end of this essay.

In what follows I briefly introduce the main components of pragmatism, after which I survey some of its relevance for policy debate. Along the way I hope to account for why this style of thinking, which so dominated early 20th century American thought but was then wholly eclipsed by the behavioral revolution of the mid-century, is making something of a comeback.

The Origins of American Philosophical Pragmatism

In a nutshell, pragmatism is organized around the idea that truth is subjective and socially constructed by conversationalists in dialogue, rather than something objective, which transcends our experience. Thus truth is local, not universal. The test for good ideas is not their truth, but their usefulness. Because what is useful for you might not be useful for me, the pragmatist tradition insists on the need for open-mindedness to different ways of seeing and acting in the world. According to Menand, pragmatists

> …believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools — like forks and knives and microchips — that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals — that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.

Some (including Menand) see pragmatism arising out of the disillusionment in this country with the Civil War and its aftermath. The devastating wreckage of so total a war made even the most convincing moral dogmas seem like empty platitudes, at least for some like Oliver Wendell Holmes, who saw the action close up and in all its horror. Holmes, three times wounded in battle and very nearly killed as a soldier for the northern army, became the leading advocate of pragmatist sensibilities on the Supreme Court, where decades later he served with distinction. There Holmes famously argued the "life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience." As Menand writes of Holmes, the lesson he "took from the [Civil] war can be put into a sentence. It is that certitude leads to violence."

The idea that experience matters more than conviction, that skepticism is a more reliable a guide for action than belief, thus reflects both a historically produced sentiment and a philosophical principle. Importantly, such skepticism does not (for pragmatist thinkers) recommend inaction. Just because one stops insisting on being right does not mean one should stop trying to do good. This idea was elaborated by all four of the major first American pragmatists: William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey (the first three of whom met in a discussion group they called The Metaphysical Club, and thus the title of Menand's book). In what follows I offer just some passing examples of the thought characteristic of the pragmatists, and am obviously not able to present a more systematic rendition of their overall positions in this space. Beyond the Menand reader I'd recommend the essay on pragmatism in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* — it is now getting dated (it appeared in 1967), but remains a great introduction to the founding conceptualizations. An even shorter but still useful introduction is in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (the 1995 edition, vol. 25, contains a section on pragmatism in the entry entitled "Philosophical Schools").

Though the intellectual ideas of James, Peirce and Dewey (the three self-identified philosophers in the group) intersect in complicated ways, one scheme mentioned by Columbia philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser (from an interview he did with Brian Magee) is often cited:

> Peirce presented us with a pragmatic theory of meaning, a pragmatic theory of clarification of some concepts. James presented us with a pragmatic theory of truth. Peirce developed a theory of inquiry. Dewey took some aspects of Peirce's theory and generalized it to apply to social and political philosophy as well. Peirce's theory of, or approach to, meaning is related to his theory of belief. For many, the important point is to link belief, meaning, action, and inquiry.

Peirce was born in 1839, the son of a Harvard professor of mathematics, and only late in life did he devote himself to philosophy after a fairly full career in the sciences (especially physics and astronomy). Although he never wrote a book, his collected papers run to eight full volumes, and have been influential in many areas of intellectual work. You may have noticed in the preceding quote how it seems like all of pragmatism started with Peirce, and there is some truth in this; in fact it was Peirce who coined the term as a philosophical principle. For Peirce, ideas are "truthful" when they survive sustained challenge. Just as scientific communities talk and argue, over time producing knowledge claims they accept as true, societies proceed dialogically to create their own functional truths. These truths are not universal or transcendent; to say something is true means only that it would survive the scrutiny of continued debate and argument.

Such a theory of inquiry does not deny the existence of reality: sometimes our theories of the world ("I can walk through this wall") are proved nonfunctional when reality pushes back. But while our debates sometimes enable us to rule out some hypotheses, they do not enable us to ever definitively claim we have identified truth, or fixed in our words reality's essential nature.

William James was, like Peirce, Harvard educated, and after taking a degree in medicine taught there for most of his famous career (one of his brothers was Henry James the novelist). William's most influential books were all written during his last twenty years: *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, and *Pragmatism* in 1907. The latter book was the one that introduced philosophical pragmatism to the broader educated public (Peirce, by the way, mainly liked the book, but later referred to himself as a "pragmaticist" so that the distinctions between himself and James would remain clear). *Pragmatism* starts with an argument against philosophy as conventionally practiced — James claims the traditional frameworks have lost their relevance when it comes to actual problem solving. In choosing which philosophy should guide us, pragmatism provides a set of principles able to help us navigate among apparently contradictory worldviews (though a part of the book is dedicated to a defense of why these contradictions are often illusory).

James' argument defends a strong view of human agency, of the possibilities for action in a contrary and confusing world. In doing so, he explores in some detail the "will to believe," and the possibilities for rational choice (this partly explains his interest in the theme of religious faith). One prevalent argument is derived from a version of simple cognitivism, and says our willingness to believe should only extend as far as the evidence will take us. If the evidence is poor, our level of belief should be low; if it is strong, then we are justified in a higher level of commitment. James' position is a little different from this, and using a pragmatist perspective (which takes into account how our rationality is the product of logic, yes, but also of our desires, preferences, and goals) he explores how belief is sometimes justified even in the face of very poor evidence. One of his examples is of a person who has to decide between "B" and "not-B," and let's make the example difficult by stipulating that the evidence for both is exactly as compelling. The simple cognitivist would say the only rationale outcome would be agnosticism. But James says the person facing this choice has every right to choose either one, and can even do so by appealing to some non-cognitive variables (so one might, e.g., affirm "not-B" on the grounds it better satisfies one of my goals). Notice how James, like Peirce, is still committed to the outcome of thoughtful discussions where evidence is marshaled — if the evidence emerges clearly in favor of one view, then it would be irrational not to endorse it. But when the situation is murky, James is acknowledging how our choices invariably (and rightly) involve other considerations.

John Dewey was born the last of these four (1859) and lived the longest (until 1952). Dewey's career was that of a university professor, first at Michigan, then Chicago and Columbia. When Bertrand Russell wrote his *History of Western Philosophy*, Dewey was the only philosopher then-living to merit a chapter. But Dewey's work had an enormous public impact too, especially on the practice of education — his 1916 book *Democracy and Education* is still read in university education seminars today. Like Peirce and James, Dewey had an interest in science, though less because of his academic training than on account of his sheer admiration for scientific accomplishment. Centuries of technological breakthroughs led Dewey to wonder about the scientific method, and how it systematically produced such marvels. Can the methods of science be broadened to other domains of human decision making?

Like Peirce, Dewey saw science as an activity, the process of organized inquiry, where advocates propose one hypothesis after another, rejecting many, provisionally accepting others (until the evidence emerges which proves their inadequacy). And this organized social activity is not a mere abstraction, where brilliant thinkers sit on Mount Olympus and observe from afar. No, if only as a matter of sheer survival, we humans cogitate and plan and struggle to expand our understanding as players on the field. With James, Dewey saw humans as agents and not simply spectators.

Although the slaughter of World War I, its ambiguous victory for the United States and restless defeat for Germany, vindicated pragmatism's refusal of moral principle as the motor of organized action, World War II and our nation's subsequent declaration of Cold War thereafter made pragmatism seem less relevant. After all, the Cold War quickly became a crusade galvanized by certainly held ideas, such as the innate superiority of capitalism over communism, and democracy over totalitarianism. And the great worldwide social movements organized in the aftermath of World War II, resting on the ideas of men like Gandhi, Niebuhr the theologian, and activists who came a little later, like Martin Luther King, Jr., preached that progress came from moral imperatives and not out of skepticism. Despite the efforts of writers like Sidney Hook (who used pragmatism as a way to attempt a revitalization of Marxism), pragmatism faded until fairly recently, thanks to the work of scholars like Richard Rorty and, to a lesser extent, Cornel West.

Of particular relevance for critique debate, Rorty's work has attempted to reconcile pragmatism with poststructuralism. Both rest on a conception of language as a kind of tool that separates us from nature but also enables action. Pragmatism has tended to take this insight as the starting point for an understanding of how dialogue can produce local and sustainable truths; poststructuralists have tended to follow this logic to an argument about the finally unjustified nature of truth claims made in language. Rorty is controversial for many reasons — his defenses of nationalism have alienated many of his natural political allies on the left. And he takes the unusual view, at least as it relates to the activity of debate, of denying the efficacy of argument. (Rorty denies that philosophical progress is pos-

sible through argument. Why? Because to argue requires one to engage in a conversation where the basic premises are shared. This means argument is a device of conservatism. Real progress, says Rorty, comes not from step-by-step claim and counterclaim, but from the offering of "sparkling new ideas or utopian visions.") Still, I suppose one might insist that it is possible to defend some of Rorty (such as his claims about language and his defense of the pragmatic tradition) without defending everything he ever wrote.

Using Pragmatism in Policy Debates

To see how pragmatism can help debaters on the affirmative, seeking to fend off critiques, it is important to start by noticing how much pragmatism agrees with the alternative frameworks defended by some influential and common critique arguments. Some of the first critiques (and some run still on this topic, relating to technology) come from Heidegger's defense of alternative modes of thinking. Heidegger contrasts his style of rationality to Cartesian logics that distance the subject from the object, the knower from the known. This is a move the American pragmatists would have been fully comfortable with –– Dewey's entire philosophy can be read as an equally powerful indictment of Cartesian constructions of the human agent.

The point can be extended with respect to other major insights from postmodern and poststructuralist thought. Postmodernism expresses a deep skepticism regarding the potential of language to ever convey Truth. So does pragmatism. Poststructuralism emphasizes the local nature of all knowledge claims, and so does pragmatism.

And so an affirmative defense of pragmatism is powerful because is begins by conceding many of a critique's most formidable challenges to the framework of dialectically driven debate. Yet despite these concessions, some of which nullify the heart of certain critical claims, a powerful defense of debate, and of action, remains. The pragmatist might say something like this: "Of course our actions are never universally justified for all time. When we advocate this resolution (or plan) we are simply saying that, for here and now, and given the available evidence, it seems reasonable to move in this direction. In advocating such a movement, we make no claims about certain knowledge, fully justified belief, crystalline logic, or mastery/domination of the

subject matter. In fact, we speak with the humility that comes from knowing how our interaction may well prove us wrong down the road."

Such rhetoric, as appealing as it may be, is certainly vulnerable to attack. One line of argument which almost immediately occurs to negative critique debaters sometimes begins with an exchange in cross-examination, but can be articulated by way of a simple thought experiment. Let's imagine someone is speeding down a highway at 90 miles an hour, intending to reach Las Vegas by midnight. A passenger with a philosophical bent suddenly calls a fundamental assumption of this behavior into question. Maybe he points out that the regular thumping noise the driver assumes to be coming from the lines on the highway reflects a defect in the tires. Or perhaps she mentions that the assumption this highway actually leads to Vegas is radically unknowable, or at least unproved.

Once one of the underlying assumptions of action has been questioned, what is the prudent response? The pragmatist would likely reply that "we should simply continue to act, doing the best we can with the information at our disposal." But there is another reasonable response, even within the domain of pragmatism's assumptions. Maybe we in the car should radically rethink. Maybe the most prudent response would be to stop the car immediately and figure things out some more. Or, in the face of advise to speed up the car to 100 miles per hour (maybe this is the affirmative plan), perhaps we should do nothing more than choose not to affirm the new proposal, given our uncertainty.

But while pragmatism will not likely make convincing the case for <u>this</u> action, what it does is refute those who argue against the justification for <u>any</u> action. And by doing so, it provides a powerful framework for the affirmative, since after all they are typically standing there in defense of some policy change.

Pragmatism does have shortcomings. Some see it as enacting a circular logic whose main function is to validate the status quo — if an idea lives here it must be because the thought has adaptive value. But such a claim may simply valorize what is here. Others see pragmatism as simply a thin cover for older and more crass forms of act utilitarianism. And what is the ethics of pragmatism? The sleazy used car salesman who lies and finagles his way to the deal has pragmatically succeeded, but what re-

sources in the pragmatic tradition enable a discussion of whether his techniques were morally sound and not exploitative? Or, more abstractly, how could a philosophy like pragmatism, rooted in a celebration of and openness to infinite possibilities, produce standards of judgment by which to systemically discard some of those possibilities as ethically wrong, or aesthetically ugly?

Against the charge that pragmatism lacks an ethics, its defenders make many arguments. Probably the most powerful is the idea that pragmatism innately supports an ethics premised on toleration for other points of view. Within this paradigm, one might be dismissed as having acted unethically when one shows intolerance or closemindedness. But more relevant to the debate context in which pragmatism is defended, these asserted shortcomings, while profoundly important in the broader scheme of things, are not likely to carry much force where the "alternative" is postmodern or poststructuralist thinking. For both of those traditions face the same difficult questions. Postmodernism is regularly assailed as lacking an ethics and a politics — e.g., around what rallying cry or galvanizing narrative might a postmodern crusader organize a political movement, when the starting point of postmodern critique is to allege the essentially bankrupt and coopting nature of all "metanarratives"?

In defending pragmatism on the affirmative, consider these tips. It is probably wise to *start with a general defense of pragmatic philosophy which is then refined as the debate proceeds*. Make the general case for action despite uncertainty that pragmatism enables, and when you hear indictments of the philosophy (many are still reading Rorty indictments), specify that you are not defending Rorty. Read something from Peirce or Dewey instead. This will gain you the benefits of the approach while preserving your flexibility. Second, *look for ways to apply their indictments of pragmatism to their critical framework*. In the same way a defense of pragmatism can capture or coopt many of the most radical claims of poststructuralism, for instance, one can also say they share similar shortcomings. And so when the 2NC argues that pragmatism is nothing more than a "covering rhetoric for late capitalism," point out how poststructuralism might be performing the very same maneuver. Third, *make the language of the 1AC consistent with your defense of pragmatism*. Strip away totalizing

claims and appeals to dogma and universal rights and objective knowledge, at least if you want to preserve your ability to read sources like John Dewey or Richard Rorty in the 2AC. Finally, *if you intend to defend pragmatism, you should understand it*. Read the basic works (William James and John Dewey are especially accessible sources). Look at the available readers. Along the way you'll find not only a defense of action, but also defenses for the activity of debate which may serve you well in other critique contexts.

For Further Reading

The fall 2001 issue of the *Hedgehog Review* is totally dedicated to essays on pragmatism — the special issue is named "Pragmatism: What's the Use?" Several of the issues are worth reading and quoting in debates. Beyond the basic starting points identified in the text of this essay, many other books are available which explore pragmatism in a very detailed way, and which (particularly) engage the interactions of pragmatism and postmodernism. Consider looking at these books: Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (Routledge, 1997); Charles Anderson, *Pragmatic Liberalism* (Chicago, 1990); Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1999); John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago, 1994); Chantal Mouffe, editor, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, with contributions by Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Richard Rorty (Routledge, 1996); Herman Saatkamp, editor, *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (Vanderbilt, 1995). Pragmatism is debated in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, editors, *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (MIT, 1987). For essays which connect the themes of pragmatism to the issues of communication, I recommend Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew Smith, editors, *Recovering Pragmatism's Voice: The Classical Tradition, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Communication* (SUNY, 1995).

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