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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 consituted 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

or speak of pragmatism in unison. Indeed, both Peirce and Dewey were wary of the very name 'pragmatism'. Provoked by James's liberal interpretation and what he perceived as 'merciless abuse' in literary journals, Peirce famously went so far as to replace it with the deliberately, and successfully, off-putting term 'pragmaticism'. Meanwhile, Dewey often preferred to operate under the banner of 'instrumentalism' and variants thereof. At times, even James himself seemed on the verge of ditching 'pragmatism' for either 'humanism' or 'radical empiricism'. However, among the narratives that Bernstein alludes to, one, especially, has been dominant until recently. This holds that regardless of its internal differences, pragmatism was quickly, and deservedly, relegated to the sidelines by the emergence of analytic philosophy.

Pragmatism was supposedly unable to avoid being pushed aside in this way because it failed to find satisfactory answers to the fierce criticisms levelled by some of its early critics, most notably, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. It is certainly true that in confronting such criticisms, pragmatism lost ground. For James and Dewey unwittingly conceded the terms of debate, thereby failing to develop their own pragmatist outlook at the very moment when analytic philosophy was creating an enticing alternative agenda. But, this latter point is supplanted in the dominant narrative by the more damaging view that when the analytic agenda started to catch on, pragmatism was left stranded simply because its intellectual inferiority had been amply demonstrated. A less plausible variant occasionally finds a receptive audience. This dismisses the effect of analytic philosophy's early success and puts a later date on pragmatism's decline. Dewey's death in 1952 is usually the pivotal point here. But we can ignore this narrow version. It has all the defects, and none of the explanatory advantages, of its more comprehensive rival.

On that broader understanding, pragmatism fizzled out after burning briefly with some bright promise. Eclipsed by analytic philosophy, it became a historical curiosity, residing as a dim relic in the museum of ideas, and showing little sign of vitality even when gestured towards by such commanding figures as Rudolf Carnap and W. V. O. Quine.¹⁰

If that was the whole story, then the main motivation for this collection of essays would have to be put down to historical curiosity. However, there is more to it. In the first place, the dominant

narrative has lost its grip. It served well enough in the short term, if only as a surreptitious vehicle of academic politics, smoothing the way for its own ascendancy even as it celebrated and rationalized the global, institutional success of analytic philosophy. But it was never going to stand up to serious scrutiny. The story carries *some* conviction in partly explaining why pragmatism largely dropped off the academy's official reading lists and out of its sanctioned research projects for a lengthy period. Nevertheless, inadequacy on other matters of detail only compounds its larger predictive failure. For pragmatism is back and is now perhaps more visible and more active than ever. The circumstances in which this has come about are unusual, perhaps unique.

The dominant narrative fails under close examination in two areas. First, its claim that pragmatism was manifestly unable to answer the objections of its early analytic critics is too swift and dogmatic. When these criticisms and the replies to them are investigated, it is clear that the circumstances often involved opposing sides talking past one another rather than one side defeating the other by sheer force of argument on neutral territory.¹¹ Furthermore, when the development of analytic philosophy itself is examined more carefully, it also becomes clear that rather than remaining dormant, or being discarded, in the face of that development, pragmatist ideas exerted a good deal of influence. That this may not have been obvious is due to the fact that much that pragmatism had to offer was silently and smoothly absorbed rather than ignored or refuted. Talisse and Aiken, who deplore the eclipse narrative, are emphatic on this point. They claim that twentieth-century philosophers constantly engaged the views of pragmatist opponents and that explicit discussion of Dewey's ideas, for example, only seemed scarce because those ideas had already been inextricably woven into much of the prevailing discourse.¹² In a separate lively and insightful discussion of pragmatism's fate during the cold war, Talisse makes a forceful case for rejecting the dominant narrative completely:

If we examine the work of the most influential figures in mainstream philosophy from the past sixty years – Ludwig Wittgenstein, Nelson Goodman, C. I. Lewis, Ernest Nagel, W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Wilfred Sellars, Hilary Putnam, John Rawls, John Searle, Daniel Dennett, Crispin Wright, Michael Dummett, David Wiggins, Jurgen Habermas, and Robert Nozick – we find that they either explicitly acknowledge a

distinctively pragmatist inheritance or take themselves to be responding critically to identifiably pragmatist arguments. Judged by the centrality of distinctively pragmatist theses concerning meaning, truth, knowledge, and action to ongoing debates in philosophy, pragmatism is easily among the most successful philosophical trends of the past two centuries. It seems, then, that the eclipse narrative is demonstrably false; pragmatism was alive and well throughout the Cold War, and continues to be a major force on the philosophical scene.¹³

Placed alongside the previous considerations, such remarks appear to provide ample support for a myth-destroying account, one of greater complexity and historical verisimilitude, in which pragmatism's fate is characterized in more favourable terms. But events that the dominant narrative was unable to foresee have led to a situation in which this is just one of a host of intriguing possibilities. For two famous American thinkers, who won their analytic spurs early on in their careers, shook the kaleidoscope of received history to separate out important features of the pragmatist orientation that offer, or so they argued, a fresh sense of direction to philosophy in general. The thinkers in question, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty, are discussed in separate chapters in part II. Their approach differs. Putnam is concerned to highlight the value of certain classic pragmatist ideas, as set out in the writings of the founding figures, by both digging beneath the kind of hasty, hostile rhetoric that obscured them and explaining how they can be used to tackle contemporary problems. His contribution to pragmatism can be summed up as follows:

- 1 He has returned to the texts of classic pragmatism to show, in detail, how they have been misread, especially by the early critics.
- 2 He has helped to show how some of the problematic views of the classic pragmatists, can be modified so that they are relevant now and/or can hold their own against or improve upon more recent alternatives.
- 3 He has developed a form of holism that derives from James, but embraces what he finds convincing in the relevant writings of later thinkers such as W. V. O. Quine.
- 4 Relying mainly on Dewey's work, he has explored ways in which pragmatism can help resolve current difficulties in

ethics, education and politics. In doing this, he has helped set back on track the ambitious pragmatist agenda for social improvement that was stalled by the early criticisms.

In his chapter on Putnam, David Macarthur acknowledges the debt Putnam owes to classic pragmatism even though Putnam has reservations about its views on truth and verification. Then Macarthur develops a related theme that, despite its importance, tends to be ignored. This involves Putnam's 'ambivalence towards metaphysics' (p. 189). In tackling this theme, Macarthur shows that Putnam's position – 'somewhere between James and Dewey' (p. 192) – is more nuanced than prevalent readings allow.

By continually touching base with classic pragmatist texts and ensuring that those texts are properly interpreted, Putnam is more conservative than Rorty. For Rorty is less interested in classic pragmatism's original or inherent value than the possibilities of its inspirational force and utility once it has been modernized on his terms. The modernization he has in mind involves:

- 1 divesting pragmatism of its dependence on empiricism, a dependence that he regards as having been ruptured in any case by the work of Wittgenstein, Wilfrid Sellars, W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson;
- 2 relinquishing what he sees as an unfortunate tendency towards science worship, one that looks to scientific method as a model for all modes of inquiry.

When updated in this way, Rorty believes that pragmatism will be well placed to take advantage of the innovations hatched by post-linguistic turn thinkers without having to heed the aims and ideology of the analytic tradition that many of those thinkers are taken to represent.

By drawing greater attention to pragmatism as an independent source of ideas and themes, Putnam and Rorty interrupted such progress as it had been making by stealth within mainstream philosophy. Vigorous responses to their attempts to bring pragmatism out into the open created the complex situation in which it now finds itself, one that has generated a multitude of opportunities for further competing narratives.

Some philosophers who have been encouraged to take a second, or even just a first, look at pragmatism, are still convinced that the

dominant narrative was correct in its main substantive claim: pragmatist views have little merit because they are vulnerable to obvious objections. These philosophers believe the narrative deserves to be reinstated on those terms and that for non-pragmatist philosophers, it should be business as usual. Others are unimpressed by, or hostile to, Rorty's interpretations and his reformist ambitions. Pushing a conservatism that exceeds Putnam's own, they wish to resurrect a form of classic pragmatism. Of these, different advocates favour different points of emphasis, ranging from a focus on one or other founding figure or theme to a combination thereof (though considerably higher estimations of both Peirce and science are common themes).

In general, the glare of publicity that Putnam and Rorty attracted to pragmatism had a double effect with regard to conservatism about its prospects. Some new conservatives were created: those who, when their attention was drawn to it, realized that classic pragmatism had something to offer them. In addition, especially in Rorty's case, the extra publicity stiffened the resolve of many who already had sympathy with classic pragmatism. They felt that its integrity now needed to be defended, if only on grounds of historical accuracy.

Despite the evident backlash, Rorty also acquired enthusiastic supporters who began to spin tales about what can best be called the New Pragmatism.¹⁴ In these, empiricism and scientism are indeed likely to be shed like stale skin so that a fresh orientation, better adapted to contemporary circumstances, emerges. But even here, things are complicated. Rorty's stripped down conception of pragmatism has solid supporters, though probably more from outside the philosophical establishment than within. There are also those within the fold who recognize the force of many of Rorty's suggestions, but want to hitch them up to constraints that will engender a more straightforward and robust form of objectivity than his notorious 'conversational', 'peer group pressure' and 'solidarity' models seem to allow for. They are convinced that such models cannot cater for an obvious social need for us to get things right about the world.¹⁵ Off to one side, but still important and influential, there is Robert Brandom who appears to have been immaculately retracing Rorty's footsteps in order to figure out how pragmatism and analytic philosophy can be reconciled.¹⁶ Another thinker having impact from the wings is Huw Price. In a series of imaginative,

insightful and good-humoured papers that ingeniously weave pragmatist and analytic themes together, he has added detail and subtlety to the anti-representationalism of Dewey and Rorty.¹⁷ David Macarthur, author of the Putnam chapter in this volume, as described earlier, is one of his collaborators.

In the middle of these large-scale narrative projects, some fruitful micro-historical research has also been undertaken, provoked and stimulated, no doubt, by pragmatism's greater visibility and vitality. A quick example of this is Richard Bernstein's subtle adjustment to the origins of pragmatism story. This is one in which he moves the Peircian starting point back to a series of papers published in 1868–9,¹⁸ thereby displacing the standard account, as introduced above, that homes in on the later, more widely known, 'The Fixation of Belief' and 'How to Make our Ideas Clear'.

How can a project such as this *Companion* cater for the historical complexities we have described? One way to simplify things would be to set aside matters of historical origins and concentrate on the views of thinkers who have uncontroversially sailed under a pragmatist flag. But this would be a strange way to tackle a philosophical approach that often challenges the very distinction between historical context and intellectual content and favours trying on ideas for size: a form of fallible experimentation that it should be happy to apply, as it is surely obliged, to its own identity and origins. There is, moreover, little point in going to the other extreme of tracking down and assessing the accuracy of every historical wrinkle in the various faces that pragmatism has presented so far. The results would be overwhelming. To steer a more sensible course, this collection sets out to achieve the following.

First, it attempts to give the reader a historically sensitive overview of classic pragmatism by discussing the contributions of Peirce, James and Dewey. This is the motivation for part 1. There is no agenda, hidden or otherwise, that seeks to elevate or denigrate these contributions in comparison to either other forms of philosophy or even the kinds of pragmatism that developed later. The reader should therefore get an unbiased feel for the ways in which these founding figures approach philosophy and hence for what they consider to be important and how they want to go about things, philosophically speaking. Space does not allow for detailed attention to other major figures such as F. C. S. Schiller, George Herbert Mead

and Clarence Irving Lewis, who helped launch pragmatism and made contributions to its core ideas. However, the three opening chapters should provide the kind of grounding in basic pragmatist thought that will make their work more accessible and intriguing. This grounding should also prepare readers to tackle their own version of the dilemma of choice identified by Nicholas Rescher: 'It is clearer than ever that pragmatism as a whole comprises a collection of rather different doctrines and that if one is to be a pragmatist one must choose among them'.¹⁹

Part II deals with pragmatism's recent revival, one that cannot be denied even though the dominant narrative is badly mistaken. Questions of 'how?' and 'why?' are addressed indirectly: by invoking a complexity of contextual detail comensurate with that of pragmatism's origins and the contested tales of its ongoing identity.

First-off, chapter 4, deals with an important transitional figure, W. V. O. Quine, who, despite distancing himself from it, made substantial contributions to pragmatism of his own, contributions that, as Isaac Nevo points out, 'no student of that school can safely ignore' (p. 83). In chapters 5 to 7, the possible connections between pragmatism and thinkers of an ostensibly different orientation are examined, the key examples being Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. It is an important feature of how pragmatism has spread its wings during, and since, its revival that such connections have been explored (though, some critics would say exploited). Again, limitations of space prevent discussion of other figures, the most notable, perhaps, being Nietzsche.²⁰

In chapter 5, Richard Bernstein provides a synoptic view of three periods in American philosophical history when Hegel's ideas have come to the fore. In doing so, he shows how these are related to pragmatism. Bernstein's wide-ranging discussion deals with the attitude of the classic pragmatists towards Hegel before moving on to consider the views of Wilfrid Sellars, Robert Brandom and John McDowell, emphasizing pragmatist themes in each case. Mark Okrent's *Heidegger's Pragmatism: Understanding, Being and the Critique of Metaphysics*²¹ is a seminal text for those who wish to understand how, and why, pragmatism has recently begun to spread its wings. In that book, Okrent argued that the early Heidegger exhibited a kinship with the classic pragmatists in the sense that he, too, was a pragmatic verificationist regarding linguistic meaning

and conceptual content. In chapter 6 Okrent discusses what he sees as a deeper and more important affinity that accounts for this. It concerns 'what it is for an agent to be intentionally engaged with a world' (p. 126).

Apart from scattered remarks on James, Wittgenstein did not engage with classic pragmatists. Nevertheless, he was coopted as a chief ally of pragmatism by Richard Rorty. As early as 'Pragmatism, Categories and Language' (1961), Rorty tried to show that 'the closer one brings pragmatism to the writings of the later Wittgenstein and those influenced by him, the more light they shed on each other'.²² And, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,²³ Wittgenstein is one of the three heroes (the others being Heidegger and Dewey) who show us how to shake off the dead hand of the epistemological tradition that culminated in the analytic approach to philosophy. Furthermore, Hilary Putnam takes the possibility of a significant connection between pragmatism and Wittgenstein seriously enough to devote a chapter of his *Pragmatism*²⁴ to the very issue as to whether Wittgenstein was a pragmatist.

In chapter 7, Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read survey the usual motivation for exploring this issue, but then they push the associated debates into new territory. They do this by demonstrating their own solution to a problem precipitated by these. The problem is that of finding a way to write 'authentically' on what they call 'the Wittgenstein-pragmatism nexus'. And the solution is to 'write authentically as a Pragmatist-Wittgensteinian'.²⁵ The authors try to show how this pans out in the field of environmentalism. Here, their foil is the claim by Williams and Parkman that '[e]ffective solutions to environmental problems must be framed in very pragmatic ways – in terms of consequences and actions' (p. 173).

The chapters just discussed present a minor organizational puzzle. In trying to forge connections with the philosophers concerned, pragmatist thinkers are obliged to dip into the past. For this reason the corresponding chapters have been given a conventional historical ordering. However, much of their significance stems from the impetus given to historical explorations by the two contemporary philosophers most responsible for pragmatism's revival: Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam.²⁶ In this sense, these philosophers merit chronological priority. However, the present ordering has been chosen in the interests of neutrality. It enables readers to get a feel