On What Pragmatism Was

F. Thomas Burke

Department of Philosophy

University of South Carolina

E-mail: burke@sc.edu

blah blah

etc etc
Preface

As of this writing, the United States is midway through the first term of Barack Obama’s presidency. Throughout his campaign and into his first term, Obama has been both praised and condemned on various grounds for his professed “pragmatism.” The fact that Obama claims to be a pragmatist calls attention to the importance of the question of what pragmatism is. It is that important.

So my whole goal over the next four years is to make sure that whatever arguments are persuasive [are] backed up by evidence and facts and proof that they can work, that we are pulling people together around that kind of pragmatic agenda. (Obama 2009)

Any U.S. president, Obama or otherwise, probably should be a pragmatist, in some sense of that term. Such a claim is worthless, though, if we do not know what it means to say that. It is worse than worthless if, for whatever purpose, the meanings of the terms ‘pragmatist’ and ‘pragmatism’ are distorted or misused. The latter assumes, of course, that we know how to use those terms properly. So how do we do that? What is pragmatism?

There are numerous possibilities if we can believe what we read in the political news media.

For instance, to profess pragmatism might simply mean that one would avoid dogmatic ideology for its own sake in favor of common-sense post-partisan (pluralistic) practicality (Berkowitz 2009; Bronsther 2009; Critchley 2008; Dionne, Jr. 2009a,b; Gordon 2009; Hamburger and Wallsten 2009; Hayes 2008; Lerner 2009; Lim 2009; Lizza 2007; Lowry 2009; Packer 2008; Payne 2008; Rivas 2009; Salam 2008; Schultz 2009; Sunstein 2008).
Or it might mean that policy decisions are to be made on the basis of what works—on the basis of what is effective in getting things done (Aboulafia 2009d; Hayes 2008; Ignatius 2007; Koopman 2009; Kroft 2008; Lowry 2009; Obama 2009; Schultz 2009; Wickham 2008).

To some this suggests a problem-oriented focus on consequences, results (Hayes 2008; Kantor 2009), while to others its entails an emphasis on means, not ends (Reich 2009).

An emphasis on “what works” may otherwise suggest a kind of data-driven evidence-based empiricism (Dionne, Jr. 2009a; Engel 2002; Payne 2008; Sunstein 2008), or it may suggest something else, such as the successful promotion of a favored agenda or partisan cause (Berkowitz 2009; Gerson 2009).

Or is it simply a kind of anti-intellectual practicality (Bronsther 2009)? It might be worse than that. To some, any emphasis on “what works” may signify only a concern for expediency at the expense of principle (Hayes 2008), often as if principle and expediency exclude one another—a matter made all the worse if it is only self-serving vote-winning political expediency at issue. This often seems to be what real-world politics is ultimately about—the pragmatist being one who readily accepts this fact and strategizes accordingly for political advantage (Aboulafia 2009b,c; Dionne, Jr. 2009b; Lim 2009; Lizza 2007; Packer 2009; Smith 2008; Weisberg 2009).

This in turn may suggest to some an ethical and philosophical emptiness and, thus, a lack of moral leadership (Aboulafia 2008; Bronsther 2009; Critchley 2008; Gerson 2009; Packer 2009; Reich 2009).

On the other hand, pragmatism to some means open-mindedness, epistemological modesty, an appreciation of human fallibility, and prudent flexibility in solving problems—versus dogmatic adherence come what may to rigid moral ideals or political agendas (Aboulafia 2009a,d; Hayes 2008; Schultz 2009; Sunstein 2008).
This in turn suggests to some a kind of waffling opportunism (Gerson 2009; Hamburger and Wallsten 2009; Sunstein 2008).

And on it goes.

A pragmatist may indeed be any of these things; but it is not clear that any of these things, alone or together, really tell us what pragmatism is. Minimally, if this quick survey is any indication, the meaning of the word ‘pragmatism’ is in need of clarification.

It is hoped that a bit of historical analysis of the origins of philosophical pragmatism will help to correct this problem. That is in any case what this book is about—the origins of philosophical pragmatism. I am not sure what Obama means by the term ‘pragmatism’; but what it should mean, we will come to see, is that one’s concepts—and thus one’s ideologies and their constituent principles—are not as clear as they could be until one has operationalized them (and if that cannot be done, then those concepts are to that extent unclear). Pragmatism is after all a philosophical stance or attitude about the contents of our concepts, asserting that it is not enough to know how concepts are related to one another but that we also need to know how they work on the ground when applied in concrete situations (Engel 2002; Kantor 2009; Lizza 2007; Obama 2008b; Schultz 2009). It is this latter characterization of pragmatism that one does not see enough of in the press. It also indicates how and why it is rather hard actually to be a pragmatist and not just to brandish the term about to gain rhetorical points, or worse, to try to legitimate self-serving policies.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as
citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time. (Obama 2008a)

For Obama, whether as a “clear-headed” realist or merely as a self-interested political strategist, these statements may be the expedient things to say in a speech on “race” in the midst of a campaign for the U.S. presidency. In fact, though, and in spite of any such political expediency, these statements point to what pragmatism actually is as it plays out in political arenas—the view, namely, that real meaning is grounded ultimately in concrete worldly actions and their sensible consequences.

In colloquial terms, this says that it may seem easy to talk the talk, but the talk is empty of real content if you can’t walk the walk. The point here is not just that one should walk one’s talk—not just that one should do something and not just talk about it. The point rather is that one does not really know what one is talking about except in terms of such doing. Pragmatism is thus a view about the nature of the semantic and pragmatic contents of one’s words, not a moral admonition of some sort.

To understand what this means, we need to put the newspapers and magazines down for a bit and try to get accustomed to working through some rather dense philosophical texts. Many people like their pragmatism in small doses, with a large measure of mixer. Here we serve it neat. At certain junctures, there will be some long quotations from primary texts—in particular, from the writings of William James and Charles Peirce. It is hoped that readers will be inspired to find and read the original texts in their entirety. It is assumed that many readers will not yet have actually read these texts, in which case this may be a first opportunity for those readers to see how
pragmatism was originally conceived. Even if one has seen these classic passages before, perhaps it would be good to see them again. Somewhere in all of the politicking, this material is getting lost.
## Contents

Preface iv

Introduction: The Pragmatic Maxim 1

1 Peirce’s Early Presentation of the Maxim 6

2 James’s Presentation of the Maxim 12

3 Peirce’s Later Versions of the Maxim 25

4 A Composite Sketch of the Maxim 44

5 Empiricism versus Pragmatism 53

6 Perception and Measurement 63

7 Case Study: The Settlement Movement 76

8 Political Pragmatism 95

Conclusion: Operational Meaning 101

Bibliography 106

Index 119
Chapter 8

Political Pragmatism

So where do we stand? We began this whole discussion with some remarks about Barack Obama’s professed pragmatism. We have seen that such a claim means different things to different people. In response to that, we have also come out in favor of a certain characterization of pragmatism that combines operationalist and inferentialist readings of the pragmatic maxim. Allegedly, we now know what pragmatism is.

If we could ignore common usage of the terms ‘pragmatic’ and ‘pragmatism’ and define them in line with what we have established here, here is what we would say. To be pragmatic is to think and work (saying what one means, formulating and implementing policies, etc.) in ways that adhere to that maxim. To be a pragmatist is to acknowledge and accept the pragmatic maxim as such and consequently to be pragmatic.

It is doubtful that anyone caught up in the daily grind of governing a country would bother with such philosophical nit-picking; but I would like to think that Obama is actually not incorrect when he labels his attitude or methods as pragmatist in nature. I would like to think that he is not incorrect in the sense that he understands (1) that pragmatism is a method for clarifying his policies and not itself a particular policy or doctrine, and (2) that this method is inferentialist but that, more fundamentally, it is operationalist. That is to say, he has claimed to be a pragmatist, and I would like to think that such a claim is consciously truthful rather than rhetorical garbage (Frankfurt 1986). It is hard enough to pin down what pragmatism is without high-profile personalities mucking up the works.
Otherwise this chapter is not really about the current U.S. President. But since he has brought up the subject, we may briefly address a number of things directly relevant to being the U.S. President, now or whenever. For instance, pragmatism is not inconsistent with at least some ideologies though it does not by itself recommend any particular ideology. More importantly, there is a difference between being a dogmatic ideologue and being able to endorse a given ideology while remaining open-minded. There is a difference between one’s reasons being concrete at least some of the time versus being purely abstract all of the time. There is apparent contrast between acting from principle versus being practical, but those are not incompatible. Etc.

A careful reading of Obama’s statements shows that he does not reject ideology as such but only “the rigid ideology and dysfunctional politics” that he and others have attributed to the Bush presidency. He moreover recommends that “America [lead] with principle and pragmatism” (Obama 2008b), as if principles and pragmatism were not at odds after all—as if partisanship and pragmatism were not incompatible (Packer 2008). That sounds right. But how is it possible? How might that make sense?

The answer is simple. Principles typically are systematized elements of some ideological framework. Ideologies and thus principles are couched in conceptual terms. As such, so far as pragmatism is concerned, for one’s principles or ideology to be as clear as possible, their constituent conceptual terms must be operationally and functionally defined. That is, the pragmatic maxim applies to any concepts employed in any given ideology—political, scientific, or otherwise. To say that Obama (or anyone else) is a pragmatist means not that he has a particular ideology (e.g., liberal or progressive), or that he has no ideology and thus no principles, but that any ideological position that he does have will have been formulated in specific ways, namely, in ways that are functionally coherent and operationally grounded.
Why is this to be preferred—as opposed, say, to not being a pragmatist? Obviously, we do not want a president to be either functionally incoherent or operationally disconnected. But even in the sense of being functionally coherent and operationally grounded, one may be a pragmatist and still be rather closed-minded. A pragmatist may well be an absolutist, an ideologue, so long as one’s ideology is to some extent functionally coherent and in some way operationally grounded. Pragmatism in itself is not a cure for dogmatism, narrow-mindedness, or stupidity. There is nothing inherently virtuous or vicious about operationalizing one’s concepts; and either way, it can be done well or badly.

But the pragmatist attitude is to be preferred simply on methodological if not logical grounds—in the sense that, while pragmatism does not guarantee intelligent decision making, it is (virtually) a necessary condition of intelligent decision making (ignoring the undependable vicissitudes of luck). Without a pragmatist methodology, we can kiss intelligent governance goodbye.

Pragmatism is to be preferred over other known philosophical attitudes for the simple reason that, for better or worse, it best reflects human nature. In particular, pragmatism encapsulates the best (workable) features of both empiricism and rationalism, and rejects their respective one-sidedness. Likewise, operationalist-plus-functionalist pragmatism embraces the arts as much as the sciences. Pragmatism provides the conditions by which one may be wholly enabled, using a full complement of human faculties, rather than being methodologically disabled in one way or another.

Being fully enabled methodologically does not entail that a pragmatist is ideologically neutral, though open-mindedness in the face of the humble realization that one does not know everything may be a fairly normal pragmatist attitude. In any case, some kind of ideology is in fact unavoidable—it is a part of human nature, whatever your station in life may be. Pragmatism would be immediately refuted if it ruled out all forms of ideology (Hayes 2008). Indeed pragmatism does not force one to refrain from explicitly ideological or partisan discourse, but it does rule as
On What Pragmatism Was

unworthy certain kinds of ideology—particularly, any ideology that is so abstract or detached from the world as not to be able to accommodate an operational clarification of its basic concepts.

Pragmatism in the political arena, especially if characterized only as a version-2 pragmatism (e.g., Rorty 1998), may seem to carry with it a default partisan commitment to progressivism as opposed to conservatism (Berkowitz 2009; Dionne, Jr. 2009a; Hamburger and Wallsten 2009; Lowry 2009; Milligan 2009; Packer 2008; Schultz 2009; Sunstein 2008). But that misconstrues the nature of the requisite flexibility inherent in the operationalization of one’s conceptual framework. Operationalism and empiricism are not particularly progressive or conservative attitudes. An emphasis on looking to facts as they emerge in the course of concrete actions on the ground neither recommends nor presupposes a progressive or conservative ideology. Experimentation as such is not the enemy of either a progressive or conservative ideology unless that ideology (like certain fundamentalist religious ideologies perhaps) is hostile to exploring and accommodating new facts. The pragmatist attitude easily accommodates an aversion to uncompromising if not mindless adherence to absolutes of either stripe; but that is a meta-ideological attitude, not an ideological position in itself.

The problem with any particular ideology “is not its content but its form. Not the substance of ideology but the fact that [one is] too wedded to it, too rigid and dogmatic” (Hayes 2008). This is a good point that applies to any ideology, progressive or conservative. Pragmatism does not solve this problem. While promoting no particular ideology and offering no sure-fire cure for dogmatism, pragmatism only makes the methodological point that, at bottom, it is not what you think you believe—certainly not what you say you believe—but what you do, how you act in the world, that determines the actual content of your ideology insofar as such activities determines the empirical contents of the concepts constituting that ideology. It is not just the consequences of belief that count but also the consequences of acting in accordance with the conceptual contents
of your belief that matter. Such an attitude is actually hard to maintain consistently insofar as it disallows institution of the leisure of mere thought as a fixed state separate from the labor of knowing what the thought is actually about.

Just look at the characterization of pragmatism as both inferentialist and operationalist. This easily accommodates “the better angels of our nature.” But there are plenty of short-sighted self-serving forms of pragmatism out there that are no less pragmatist for all that. Pragmatism as such is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. It is neither a virtue nor a vice (Reich 2009). Pragmatism as such is not an ethical stance; it is a (methodo)logical one.

So are we to be concerned that a U.S. President who espouses pragmatism may be a moral relativist, steering the ship of state with no moral compass (Aboulafia 2008)? By itself, espousing pragmatism, if one is true to philosophical pragmatism, says pretty much nothing one way or the other about moral sensibilities. But if a “compass” metaphor is in order, then we should consider it carefully.

We—as Americans or simply as human beings—build ideologies to make our way through life the way we build ships to navigate the world’s oceans. A ship’s captain and crew utilize compasses and related navigation tools to know where they are and where they are going—using locally manageable tools to get a sense of realities well beyond the confines of the ship itself. External realities like the local direction of the planet’s gravitational and magnetic fields simply are what they are, independently of how the ship is built; and the ship’s compass, if it is to be of any use, has to be built to move freely on a pivot, not rigidly attached so as to be aligned always with the ship’s deck.

If the analogy holds, one’s “moral compass” should not be rigidly aligned with one’s ideological conceptual framework either but have a flexible sensitivity to a larger reality that (surely) one’s ideology does not fully encompass. Having a “moral compass” that is able to “pivot” in response
to the “rocking” of one’s ideology is surely the way to go—that is, if a compass analogy is at all appropriate.

What this means, literally, is that moral judgment requires a sense of history (garnered through experience) and interpretive skills oriented to a humble but alert appreciation of the fact that long-term consequences of our actions proliferate well beyond what we are able to discern by present lights. An engrained humility in this respect could be that on which a fully charged and reliable moral compass would pivot.