Brandon Arnold

University of Denver

Honors Thesis Proposal

Pragmatism, a distinctly American mode of philosophy, deserves a far-reaching reconsideration. In a political, social, and economic situation that reeks of conflict and is rifle with impractical attempts at reconciliation, pragmatism offers a unique framework to effectively address the growing number of crises we face. This thesis seeks to evaluate the historical situation of pragmatism within the greater Western philosophical canon, and pay homage to the transcendentalist roots by arguing in favor of a unique political application for the theoretical framework.

Pragmatism became systematically developed at the turn of the 20th century, primarily through the works of C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Contemporaneous thinkers, and often interacting with one another in in forums like the Metaphysical Club at Harvard, these three writers combine to develop a philosophical system that includes critical evaluation of logic, metaphysics, ethics, and many fields in between. However, pragmatism’s distinctly American origin and representation have often been a concern for considering it a comprehensive philosophical framework. One of the goals of this thesis is to resituate pragmatism’s position within the greater philosophical canon, bringing light upon deeper connections to philosophical traditions that have been underappreciated.

Another emergent lens that will be dominant throughout this thesis is one of juxtaposition. The process of juxtaposition places two ideas in close positioning to reveal the contrasting effects, a literary term that pragmatism has turned to have practical understanding. The pragmatic emphasis on the practical application of ideas on human experiences guides decision making in requiring the practical effects of a conception to be critically evaluated. Ideally, this paradigm of constant criticism allows for the most practical considerations to develop, as previous considerations are always in a constant state of comparison and criticism with new considerations, developing the most practically effective conclusions.

Although the focus on juxtaposition will be important, the thesis will also explore a potentially problematic aspect of the lens. The process of juxtaposition focuses on comparing two concepts. This is like many other ways in viewing the world, such as the dominant presence of dichotomies and Hegel’s dialectic; this bisection no longer seems to have adequate practical effect. Instead, this thesis will focus on developing a more inclusive approach, on that is focused on embracing a plurality of possible understandings. Much of human history has enjoyed a bisection within its most critical and defining structures, but that bisection is being challenged with powerful voices. This seems to be expanding the breadth in which human experience can be understood, and the pragmatic framework can appreciate this expansion and include it within theoretical developments. Pragmatism allows the historical issues to maintain relevance, but we can critically examine those to produce better situations.

This thesis will progress through two distinct sections, first a genealogy of pragmatism, and second and argument about how pragmatism can be a sufficient framework for producing solutions to crisis. Through this structure, two clear research questions will guide the work: (1) does pragmatism deserve greater attention and consideration in the philosophical canon, and (2) does the pragmatic focus on practical application in human experience create an epistemological and metaphysical framework that can solve crisis?

The genealogy will begin with connecting pragmatic thought within the philosophical tradition, specifically in classical Greek and post-enlightenment Germany, and will continue to link the traditional pragmatic philosophers, Peirce, James, and Dewey. The genealogy continues to include modern pragmatic philosophers such as Cornel West and Richard Rorty. Once the position on pragmatism has been qualified, the thesis will transition to a consideration of crisis. In this consideration, the thesis will focus on a theory of crisis, developed collaboratively in another paper, which outlines crisis as being events that are sufficient for causing broad changes within human structures. The thesis will look to extend upon that work, as my section traced the historical impact of crisis upon politics in developing a modern theory of the state. Through using this lens of the state, this thesis looks to offer a reliable way to address political crises in the modern world. While the primary authors of pragmatism rarely focused on specifically political considerations, politics is a sphere that uniquely deals and structures human experience, and as such pragmatism has enjoyed much use in politics. The thesis will use historical leaders to evidence the practical application of pragmatism in politics, and demonstrate the diversity in which pragmatism can by employed.

Some of the major works I will draw upon:

1. **Pragmatism**

Dewey, John, et al. *The Essential Dewey*. Indiana University Press, 2007.

James, William, and Ralph Barton Perry. *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking: Together with Four Related Essays Selected from the Meaning of Truth*. Longmans, 1959.

-- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology Vol 1*. Macmillan, 1907.

Kaag, John J. *American Philosophy: a Love Story*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club:* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Peirce, Charles S., et al. *The Essential Peirce*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy a Genealogy of Pragmatism*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

1. **Crisis**

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. Seuil, 2003.

-- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005.

Foucault, Michel, and Michel Senellart. *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College De France, 1978-1979*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

-- Foucault, Michel, et al. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the CollÃ¨Ge De France, 1977-1978*. Picador/Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Golder, Ben. “Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power.” *Radical Philosophy Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, pp. 157–176., macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/biogeo/files/2009/10/ben-Golder-essay.pdf.

Schmitt, Carl, et al. *Dictatorship: from the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle*. Polity, 2017.

-- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008.

Sluga, Hans D. *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

1. **Leadership**

Gardner, Howard, and Emma Laskin. *Leading Minds an Anatomy of Leadership*. BasicBooks, 2011.

-- Gardner, Howard. *Five Minds for the Future*. Perseus Distribution Services, 2009.