

Meliorism in the Pragmatist Discourse between Truth, Morality and Education

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Abstract

Philosophy in its traditional sense is regarded as a discipline that focuses on thought, reason and ideas. It is indifferent to action, where psychology, sociology and anthropology have taken this role. The pragmatists concern is the gap between thought and action. Returning the attention to action led to pragmatism being seen and valued more as a moral philosophy and behavioral psychology. This is precisely where the interest of this philosophy lies; how people can improve themselves and the world, expressed with the concept of 'meliorism'. Before that, James, Piers, etc. enter the philosophical discourse, revealing the principles and methodology of the study itself, the meaning and explanation of phenomena. Hence, the connection between gnosiology and morality is essential. The issue becomes even more complex, because from the discovery of the truth it moves to human identity, culture and the need for progress. The concreteness of this optimistic philosophy is achieved through education. Meanwhile, the discourse will arise between the questions: What is the truth for pragmatists? How is the relationship between truth, individual and society expressed phenomenologically? How can it be passed without harsh frustrations towards progress?

Keywords: meliorism, gnosiology, morality, education

Introduction

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement which started and was highly developed in the United States of America at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Empiricism, romanticism and especially utilitarianism constitute the basis of this philosophical movement. Its main representatives are Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914), who is known as the founder of pragmatism (1870), formulating it first as a theory of meaning; William James (1842 – 1910), the most authoritative philosopher of this movement; John Dewey (1859-1952), who was oriented towards education and social theories.

'*Pragmatic*' comes from the Greek '*pragma*' which means '*something done, a fact*' (Stumpf, 2000, p. 383) and '*pragmaticos*' means '*something active, the action of a man who knows how to do something concrete*'. In ancient Greek the word '*praxis*' refers to

activity or commitment by free people. Aristotle claimed that there were two basic human activities: thought (theory) and practice (doing, action), which connected them to four causes: formal, material, operative and final (Stumpf, 2000, p. 90). In other words, pragmatism is the ability and process by which a theory, lesson or knowledge is applied, realized. '*Praxis*' refers to the act of engaging, applying, performing, realizing or implementing ideas. Aristotle distinguishes two forms of knowledge, the practical ones gained from experience, which he calls '*Phronesis*' and the abstract and theoretical knowledge called '*episteme*' (Gadamer, 2004, p. 312). '*Phronesis*' means knowledge carried by an active being, who goes through varied experiences (knowledge), but never identical to each other.

Referring to this meaning, pragmatism is seen as a philosophy of action and concrete life. It has often been criticized as immoral and atheistic, sometimes equating it with cynicism, sometimes as a behavior of personal interest, to the limits of machiavellianism. However, the pragmatist position insists on the humanism of its views, because man is placed in the center. What is noted here is the inevitable connection between the methodology in discovering the truth and the experience of the knowing subject. The answer to the question, what constitutes the criterion of truth?...would simultaneously explain the nature of the relationship between the idea and the fact? Consequently, reflection leads us to the moral judgment of the meaning of the connection between principle and action, behavior or attitude.

The truth between idea and fact

U. James explains us the relationship between fact and point of view. We should be interested in philosophy and also in the way we see or use fact. For example; a general is interested in the number of soldiers of the opposing army, but more essential for him would be the strategy, philosophy or form of organization of the opposing general. He will start to be interested in what ways he can use this fact, that is, the number of soldiers (James, 2005, p. 15). Fact and interpretation are in symbiosis and cannot be seen separated from each other. For James "*... the most interesting thing is how this philosophy determines the perspective on your world* " (James, 2005, p. 15), because it emphasizes the inevitable relationship between the world and the human subject. Our perspective on the world, events, experiences, phenomena creates our entire reality, state and identity.

Milli earlier emphasized that man is the creator of himself and his world, because the mind is characterized by pragmatic limitlessness. The freedom understood in this idea means that man is not an imitator. He does not just choose the alternatives given to him, but has the ability to create according to his own way and experience. In Mill's notion, *freedom* is mostly a treatise on *individualism*. Individual freedom is understood as an independent but not isolated entity. The human being opens up to the world, creating himself. The notion of *eccentric* (Mill, 2015, p. 85), a term borrowed from astro-physics, illustrates the meaning of individuality. The subject is the center where the world is created, it manifests it as reality and this reality

influences the entire social cosmos of which it is part. At the same time, during this process, the outside world also affects the subject. In this opening something new is always born, which sublimates the simple fact of being human. Precisely, this makes it special, authentic, not identical to others, thus creating a pluralistic human world. As a result, a value that Mill highly appreciates is obtained ; social diversity and diversity of life experiences. In this line of reasoning, James's pragmatism would affirm that we live in a plurality of worldviews (James, 2005, p. 19)..

The history of philosophy itself appears to us as a debate between two different attitudes, between empiricists and rationalists, where each side claims to have the right method to get to the truth. W. James does not like such a division between 'empiricists', who believe in the variety of facts, and on the other hand 'rationalists', who emphasize absolute, abstract and eternal principles. Like Schiller, James believes that *"Man needs both facts and principles, but the question is which one of them is emphasized more...?"* (James, 2005, p. 19). For a pragmatist to be intellectually satisfied *"... there is an attraction to the good things of both sides"* (James, 2005, p. 22). The world is sometimes understood as rational and sometimes as empirical, sometimes understood as one and sometimes as a diversity. The meaning of one absolutely does not exclude the other. We must accept this democratic principle of knowing the world. It is both this and that, *"... thus undertaking a kind of monistic pluralism"* (James, 2005, p. 22). Reality is a combination of the two attitudes. We must accept this symbiosis of two opposite sides of the world, however paradoxical it may seem. Consequently, first we have our viewpoint and then we act, we behave in accordance with our worldview. Also, we should always respect the other individual, regardless of the contradiction we may have in terms of point of view or way of living.

On this account, pragmatists emphasize the notion of '*adaptation*'. Between the idea and the fact, the truth is found in the adaptation between them, that is, how the idea corresponds to the fact. Separated from each other we would have an empiricism without humanity and an illusory rationalism (James, 2005, p. 28).

The humanization of truth

"According to the pragmatic principle, *we cannot reject any kind of hypothesis if it has consequences of value for life*" (James, 2005, 197). In this principle, truth is measured by value. But how does the truth take value? What differentiates the truth from the lie is the practical criterion. The truth is related to the situation, that's where it takes on value. The example James gives is this: *"If they ask me; What time is it?... and I tell you that I live at Irwin. Street 95', I may have told you the correct answer, but it is untrue because it does not apply"* (James, 2005, p. 168). So in this case, how to give the correct address as incorrect, it does not change anything, because it has no value for the concrete situation. Just as the triangle area formula holds true when we are measuring the area of the triangle. The formula remains worthless if we need to find the area of the square. We can give theoretical principles on the phenomenon, but if we do not respond to the demands of concrete circumstances, they remain empty discourses.

"...pragmatism unified for people the realm of fact and value" (Stumpf, 2000, p. 383). Obviously, pragmatism leans on empiricism, because it sets as a condition for the truth, its consequence in the concrete world. Principles and ideas in themselves, as abstractions of thought, become true, i.e. they take value only if they correspond to the factual reality. Meanwhile, reality is dynamic, diverse and changeable, this means that truth is random in ideas. Ideas are potentially true. The truth is a possibility and is realized only when it is good, and good for pragmatists means when it serves the concrete fact. So, the truth belongs to the occasion, the circumstances of the actuality, it is contextual. There are no eternal and universal principles. Different ideas serve to explain or give meaning to different situations. Hence, we postulate that there are no universal, eternal and absolute moral principles.

James claims that principles and concepts cannot supersede reality and dominate it. *"...theories become not answers to enigmas, but instruments that can be helpful"* - writes James (James, 2005, p. 50). They can help us to explain and provide solutions to concrete experiences. In the sense of moral situations, they can be used as tools in order to deal with dilemmas, moral contradictions or to justify a certain behavior. Different theories and views on morality serve us to solve or understand diverse moral situations such as; duty, responsibility, right, good and bad. Pragmatism is seen as a solution to the theoretical contradictions of morality, providing the condition of value and practical utility. A moral situation is explained and understood by a theory or a set of ideas that discuss the event. While other moral theories, which do not respond to this reality, remain untrue. The starting point is not from abstraction, heavenly ideas, but their extension to earthly experience.

For Piers *"... thinking always occurs in a context and not detached from it"* (Sumf, 2000, p. 384). The truth of the pragmatists is presented as a symbiosis between rationalism and empiricism. Here the humanism of pragmatism appears, where truth and understanding derive from experience (Stumpf, 2000, p. 384). Human experience underlies everything. In this sense, truth is part of the process of experience and not separate from it. We must explain the truth of the event, referring to its own requirements. Phenomena should be judged based on the authenticity of the claims, where the situation gives value to the idea.

Morally, it is seen as a behavior that expresses thought, where thought also shows behavior at the same time. Morality is formed as a connection or perfect match of idea with behavior. For example, my belief, value and principle is not to steal, so is the action, but when someone steals to survive, I give up my original principle and start judging based on the specific circumstances, justifying the action of someone who stole. Then I think that stealing is punishable, but in the conditions of survival it is acceptable, which means that I will also allow myself in the conditions of survival. But what if someone is just a lazy person and has brought himself to survival conditions, how will he be judged morally? If it is so, when the circumstances change, in the deepest sense of the situation, I will have to reformulate my principle: stealing is

punishable, but in the conditions of survival and absolute impossibility, I would also allow myself to carry out this act. Indirectly I morally condemn laziness. Someone else can think differently, for him, above all, survival dominates regardless of the causes so in this case his principle will be: stealing is punishable, but in the conditions of survival, regardless of the factors that have led me to this state, I would also commit it as act. So the principle matches the action perfectly.

At the core of pragmatist philosophy lies human life, because "*... practical means the way in which thought leads to action*" (Stumpf, 2000f, p. 382). Piers shares the opinion that "*... our beliefs serve as rules for action*" (James, 2005, p. 45). Our behavior, actions or attitudes depend entirely on the thoughts, beliefs, worldview or personal values in which we believe or identify ourselves as particular individuals. Good or bad, right or wrong, is always judged by personal conviction and worldview. Then between thought and action lies faith. For Piers there are three forms of faith:

- a) *Persistence – belief in the ideas of culture and social tradition*
- b) *Authority – refers to the authority to act*
- c) *Metaphysics – the belief that something is acceptable from reason*

Which of these beliefs should we rely on? Piers rejects all three ***because they do not support the unique experience of the individual.***

Thus:

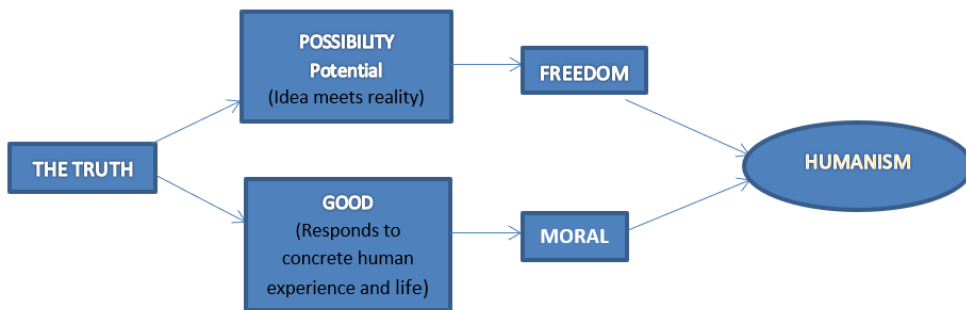
- a) *The method of persistence is an irrational action, it is an action from a blind faith.*
- b) *The method of authority excludes reflection*
- c) *The metaphysical method is realized by avoiding the facts (Stumpf, 2000, p.385)*

Further, Piers would emphasize that "*... the meaning of a thought is enough to clarify what behavior it will cause for us and that behavior is the only thing that matters*" (James, 2005, p. 45). By 'cause' we mean all kinds of concrete consequences. The effects it leaves as; certain feelings, reactions, behaviors or attitudes. The consequences of thought in a practical sense matter both for immediate and later effects.

From this reasoning, the question arises; does pragmatism defend the functionalist view? The answer is yes! Truth is called such if it has a practical function. Truth is utilitarian, and for utilitarians, utility is the essential criterion of moral justification. For James – "*... an idea is true as long as it serves our life. If you benefit from something, you accept with pleasure that it is good*" (James, 2005, p. 63) - James continues - "*...truth is a kind of good and not as it is usually considered - a category separated from the good that cooperates with the latter. Truth is called anything that gives evidence that it is good in the sense of belief and also for clear and certain reasons*" (James, 2005, p. 64). The truth is known from experience, that is, from what we really believe, from our principles, ideas or worldviews. Pragmatism is a moral philosophy,

because for it, ideas gain value if they serve the action, the concrete condition. Truth necessarily plays a function, and the function is understood as good. Logically, the truth is necessarily good, that is, it contains the good, because we really believe it as such or that it serves a concrete purpose. Truth is moral (good) and morality is knowledge (true).

Truth is a possibility for ideas, which correspond to the human moment, which means that truth is functional, that is, it responds to the authentic circumstances of experience. Understanding truth as possibility means that it responds to the spontaneous, dynamic and free character of man and social life. The truth is not imposed by building systems, where man is put at the service of the latter. If it has no function in human life or experience, then it is alienated into an oppressive mechanism. Thus for pragmatism, the truth is deeply humanistic, because in the center of attention there is man with his experience and perspectives, with his constant change, in a reality that is characterized by possibility or surprise, giving importance to the moment and his concrete (real) situation.



Conceptual scheme of the humanization of truth according to pragmatic philosophy

- Meliorism: the moral progress of the individual and society

"Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

Victor Hugo

The mutual relationship between idea and experience is the essential point of pragmatism, as the criterion that reveals truth. It means that knowledge is presented to us as a matter of morality and morality as a matter of knowledge. Schiller and Dewey emphasize the fact that "*Ideas become true as long as they help us create good relationships with other parts of experience*" (James, 2005, p. 53). Even here it is understood why people change their values and worldviews.

Man is a dynamic being, characterized by free will. He is constantly in a process of socialization and resocialization. Man shapes himself and his identity in a continuous process of doing and undoing, it is a process of self-creation that does not stop. "*The individual paradoxically has a set of old thoughts, but is faced with a new experience that puts them in a difficult position*" (James, 2005, p. 53). We constantly change ideas,

attitudes, worldviews and beliefs, because experience always brings us to new, unknown circumstances, inexplicable for old concepts or principles. New ideas or situations do not follow a deterministic, certain order, because as we have emphasized, man is not only free to choose, but free to create and at the same time to create himself. Free will means opportunity. The opportunity, on the other hand, also justifies punishment, i.e. taking responsibility, because theft, lying, murder cannot even happen, regardless of the circumstances. Man is not only in the conditions of the choices of alternatives that are offered to him by the external reality, He is the creator and processor of the situation, that also brings it to the function of improvement.

This phenomenological relationship makes him special, not identical to others in his interpretation of the world and understanding of himself. You can clearly see the stoicism of the pragmatists with the principle: The world is as we make it. She is "*plastic*" - writes James (James, 2005, p. 178). We create reality, phenomena and events, and creation is simultaneously their recognition. We go out into the world and then use this experience to find ourselves, to understand ourselves, to be ourselves. (James, 2005, p. 141). In this perspective, for pragmatism "*free will is seen as a meliorist doctrine*" (James, 2005, p. 92).

Meliorism means that the world can be improved by human efforts. (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/meliorism>). Meliorism is an idea of metaphysical thinking emphasizing progress. This concept shows how the truth leads to the improvement of the world. Humans, through their intervention in processes that would otherwise be natural, can produce an outcome that is an improvement of the world and themselves. Here pragmatists differ from Kant's idea that history operates on a plan that presents a progress of nature, which reaches an unification such as cosmopolis, or universal history (Sinani, 1999, p. 75). Meliorism is not a deterministic and linear process. The improvement can go in unthinkable and unpredictable directions, this is because the very development of man and society goes through dynamic situations and circumstances are so special that it is almost impossible to generalize.

However, change does not come immediately. "Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history and biography of the individual are not affected. However, change does not come immediately. "*Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history and biography of the individual are not affected. The new truth is always a middle way, facilitating the transition. It connects the old thought with the new fact so that the knot is as little conspicuous as possible and the continuity as much as possible*" (James, 2005, p. 54). What is observed in this process is the discrepancy between the old worldview and the new experience. Precisely the contradictory (dialectical) situation also creates attitudes! The change of principles and attitudes comes in an evolutionary process, almost naturally, unconsciously. In the end, personal, authentic identity and moral behavior is an indicator of experience, of what we deeply believe, so it is shaped over time. Our morality stems from history and people's experiences are distinct from

each other. The essence of history, of life experience, is that it is difficult to accept what is new, what changes our belief or worldview created in time. Therefore, we often remain conservative in the morals that come from our experience. Conservative of our time and this is where the clash of generations begins, eg parents are often authoritarian, moralistic and out of date because they trust their time, experience and morality, which is absolutely different from that of their children.

According to J. Dewey the source of evil can also be seen here. Evil does not come from the vital force that characterizes man. "*Evil is rather a product of the particular ways in which a culture shapes and conditions human impulses*" (Stumpf, 2000, p. 395). Evil arises from the immutability of the formed habit. Habit imposes certain behaviors by referring to predetermined, universal principles or rules, which are not interested in reading the specific situation and circumstances. Thus, the moral code of a society is seen as suppressing the need of man to change, to be himself or to interpret the situation, the dynamic and changing circumstances based on the experience of the individual worldview. The habit uses the same principles for different situations. Like that anecdote; that the one who was left in the well and the one who was left on top of the pillar were saved in the same way, by pulling the rope. To one it was valuable and helpful; to the other it caused pain. In the conditions of dynamic life, of diverse situations or diverse experiences, we find it impossible to create a list of rules as a moral prescription, which means that we cannot form an ideal structure of moral principles, as habit does, because everything is judged in the particularity of the moment. Then the habit is placed in conflict with the necessity to change, refusing to immediately accept the new. This step comes as a result of time demanding acceptance, a kind of compromise for change that the old must make, showing the conflict between what is and what is to come.

Education as a necessary condition for the realization of meliorism

The essential role to make the transition without harsh frustrations, from the old crystallized to the new experience, is taken by the intellect, for the very fact that it is not an entity that consists of static concepts. It has the power to face the environment and adapt to its authentic demands. Intellect is the means to move forward, to improve the situation, that is why Dewey, called his pragmatism '*instrumentalism*' (Stumpf, 2000, p. 394). The dialectic of man and societies appears in the conflict between habit, the idea of persistence as described by Piers or faith, his collective identity that constitutes the old and the special, new situation with the aim of regulating relations with the surroundings. The conflict develops between society and the individual as a special value. Pre-established principles and rules, hardened by tradition, indicate some ways of behavior, but not that they are always necessary. "... *the key to conceptualizing individual and social evil is changing the habits of society, its habits of reaction and thought*" (Stumpf, 2000, p. 395). The meliorist power belongs to education, because it perfects the instrument, that is, the intellect, which shakes the habit until its change and makes the individual and the creative society.

Improvement is seen as a sign of emancipation, which is an evolutionary process characterized by conflict. A kind of conflict where the subject is totally committed to solving it, even anxious to solve it. This is where the revolt, the rebellion appears, which show the moment of the explosion, the beginning of the new or the change for the better.

Societies that know how to maintain and manage this conflict are inclined towards development and improvement. However, this does not mean that the most ancient ways of thinking and living, even the most primitive ones, will disappear. *"The new truths are the result of new experiences and old truths, which combine and influence each other on both sides. And since this is how opinion changes today, we have no reason to suppose that it has not always been so. It follows that among all the late changes in human thought, very ancient ways of thinking may have survived. Even the most primitive ones have not completely disappeared"* (James, 2005, p. 126). Thought which legitimizes the understanding of the individual and society today through history, ethnography and anthropology. Societies develop, but they also preserve what they were in the past, because as we said, the change is not revolutionary, as a complete separation from the old, but evolutionary. The change of man, his historical meaning based on life experience, developed within a certain social culture or tradition, is cultivated from generation to generation. Therefore, the collective identity, influencing the behavior, attitudes, and world views of the individual, is often explained on the basis of the historical times that the society has inherited. The old, the tradition, the past can be hidden, but from time to time, unconsciously, behaviors of the individual appear which belong to much earlier eras. For example; we as Albanian individuals or Albanian society sometimes bring out the Byzantine character, sometimes the Ottoman character; or different historical eras that have shaped the anthropocultural stratification from which our behavior and communication can be understood even today.

As a conclusion:

- a. Truth is a potential, possibility, where the idea meets dynamic reality.*
- b. The truth is random in ideas, because it depends on the concrete situation with particular circumstances (authentic)*
- c. Truth is moral (good), because it responds to dynamic human nature, experience and concrete life.*
- d. As a consequence of the above two points; **pragmatism as a theory of truth is equivalent to humanism.***
- e. Pragmatism defends the meliorist view, where it emphasizes the moral progress over time of man and societies*

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