

The Practicalities of the Pragmatic Person

Next time you hear somebody use the words 'pragmatic', 'pragmatist' or similar, you might want to ask for clarification - if only to make sure you both understand the same thing. Being merely practical - a synonym for pragmatic - is fine. It's when you get into the philosophy of pragmatism that things can get murky, dangerously subjective and even horrific.

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Recently, on The News Hour, I watched as Senator Hillary Clinton was quizzed – carefully – by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. During her presentation, Clinton made reference to the need (I paraphrase) to ditch ideology in favour of "pragmatism" (her word) when she takes up the position of Secretary of State.

A few days later, again on The News Hour, I watched and listened as David Brooks (of The New York Times) gushed about the "intense pragmatism" displayed and apparently espoused by Barack Obama during one of his recent interviews on national TV.

For a long time, I've heard the word 'pragmatism' and its derivatives used on many occasions by many people. But, whenever I hear it, I pause to wonder exactly what *they* mean. If you look up the word in a dictionary, however, you'll see that one of its meanings pertains to being practical.

Just being practical? Is that what most people mean when they use 'pragmatic' or 'pragmatist'? Is that what *you* understand when you hear somebody say something like: *Well, y'know, we have to be pragmatic about this issue* or *I'm a pragmatist about things in general*, and so on? But if 'practical' is the *specific* meaning to be conveyed to the reader/listener, why not just use that word and forget about 'pragmatic'?

Because, I think we all understand what **practical** means. We should because it's been around for over six hundred years as a word in common use. Among other things, it means workable, usable, effective, feasible, doable, achievable, down-to-earth, efficient, orderly, possible, and so on for a long list of synonyms that I won't bore you with any further, save one. Near the end of the list, finally, there is another synonym: **pragmatic**.

Pragmatic, on the other hand, is *not* a word that appears very much in general conversation. It sounds highfalutin to some, I guess. But, from my perspective, when politicians or corporate suits use it, it just sounds pompous: it raises more questions than it answers because it's associated with **pragmatism**, a school of analytic philosophy that appeared in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Read what you will about pragmatism at that link. Here, I want to concentrate on two fundamental aspects.

In the first place, there is the underlying philosophical belief that, for the pragmatist, **all knowledge is tentative**, at best. In other words, pragmatists tend to be skeptics. I'm very much in favor of being a skeptic, generally: a healthy, questioning attitude is a good thing, I think. However, like all ideologies, it's too easy to become seduced and blinded by overuse. Hence, any true pragmatist must guard against an entrenched skepticism becoming an end, instead of just a means. In that regard, pragmatism is not alone: all philosophies should abide by that principle.

The second aspect is the more important one. **Philosophies search for Truth** and, as is well known, there has been much debate on that topic. In the nineteenth century, the proponents of pragmatism – lead by Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey – began a new search for Truth using pragmatism as a guide and analytical tool. William James set out two propositions that are fundamental:

1. Something is true only in so far as it works; and
2. The true can also be defined as "what is good in the way of belief".

What then is the effect of taking those propositions to their logical conclusions?

From an easily understood perspective, the first makes good sense for a material world composed of objects: a steam engine, for example, generates steam to produce power to achieve some objective. Hence, there is a fundamental truth that is inherent in the working of a steam engine (so the pragmatist says) which, moving into the second proposition, is confirmed by the fact that productive work is good, and hence true in accordance with my beliefs (so says the pragmatist).

Hence, applied generally, the core belief of pragmatism resolves to this principle: **if it works, it's good**.

Which, from a *moral* perspective, if you will, is very close to saying that the end justifies the means.

Now, I don't know whether a person like Bernie Madoff is an avowed pragmatist, but his alleged bilking of \$50 billion from the gullible is **pragmatism in action**: the outrageous plan apparently worked exceedingly well for decades, and it was certainly 'good' business from his perspective. The consequences for his investors, however, are or will be catastrophic.

In a similar fashion, those financial finaglers of Wall St. knew exactly how effectively the sale of mortgage backed securities would reap gigantic commissions, provided they passed them on, Ponzi-like, as quickly as possible. It was just 'good' business practice, and not only because everybody was doing it: you'd *never* get caught with a loss if you were quick to sell it on. So it certainly worked well for them – but not for a lot of others left holding the bag.

As a philosophy, however, pragmatism has its formidable detractors, notably the late **Richard Rorty** who criticized pragmatism's failings in a number of books and articles

– but while also noting its use, within analytical philosophy, as a means for developing intellectual prowess. In that regard, perhaps then it's better to relegate pragmatism to academic inquiry, and keep it there forever?

Because politicians and others who use and misuse the word should take note: it's far better to stick to easier words, like 'practical', that carry less intellectual baggage and more clarity, particularly if they want to make sure that they are understood. They should avoid any association with pragmatism because the fallout from even the Madoffs of the world and Wall St. are bad enough to give *any* philosophy a bad name, surely.

Need I mention capitalism?

For an extreme and horrific example of pragmatism at its worst, however, I can point to the **Wannsee Conference** on January 20, 1942, where top Nazis – including **Heydrich** and **Eichmann** – finalized arrangements for the implementation of The Holocaust. At that meeting, the Nazis had to resolve governmental and logistical problems that centered upon the presence of Jews in Germany and other parts of Europe – and so arrived at coldly logical, pragmatic decisions that would work and that were good for the Nazi cause.

So - who wants or needs the ghost of Nazism as a philosophical poster child?

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