

Donald Davidson's Place in the History of Pragmatism

O Lugar de Donald Davidson na História do Pragmatismo

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Abstract: This paper explores the place of Donald Davidson in the pragmatist tradition. Pragmatists, from C.S. Peirce to C.I. Lewis to W.V. Quine, have dismantled the dogmas of empiricism (the analytic-synthetic distinction and reductionism) and replaced them with better, pragmatist structures. Davidson's taking on the third dogma of empiricism – the distinction between scheme and content – returns pragmatism to the excellent initial expression of it given by its founder, Peirce.

Key words: Davidson. Peirce. James. Lewis. Quine. Conceptual scheme. Empiricism. Pragmatism.

Resumo: *Este artigo explora o lugar de David Davidson na tradição pragmatista. Pragmatistas, de Peirce e C.I. Lewis a W.V. Quine, desmantelaram os dogmas do empirismo (a distinção analítico-sintético e o reducionismo) e as substituíram por melhores estruturas pragmatistas. A assunção de Davidson do terceiro dogma do empirismo – a distinção entre esquema e conteúdo – retorna o pragmatismo à excelente expressão inicial dada por seu fundador, Peirce.*

Palavras-chave: *Davidson. Peirce. James. Lewis. Quine. Esquema conceitual. Empirismo. Pragmatismo.*

Two kinds of pragmatism

The central insight of pragmatism is that we must start from where we find ourselves – as human beings, laden with beliefs and practices, trying to make sense of ourselves and our world. We are to deflate metaphysical theories of truth in favor of a slimmed-down concept that reflects our actual practices and use 'truth'. As C.S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, put it, correspondence (or representationalist) theories of truth make truth the subject of empty metaphysics. They are 'vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation'. We must turn our backs on them and 'begin with men and their conversation' (CP 8. 112). How could anyone aim for a truth that goes beyond experience or beyond the best that inquiry could do? How could an inquirer adopt a methodology that might achieve that aim? The very idea of the believer-independent world, and the items within it to which beliefs might correspond, seems graspable only if we could somehow step outside of our practices. The correspondence theory, Peirce says, makes truth 'a useless word' and 'having no use for this meaning of the word "truth", we had better use the word in another sense' (CP 5. 553).

Peirce is perfectly happy with the correspondence theory as a ‘nominal’ definition, useful only to those who have never encountered the concept before (CP 8. 100). It allows us to preserve the idea that truth is something objective – not a matter of what we might happen or choose to believe. But we need to illuminate this basic idea of truth by considering its linkages with inquiry, assertion, belief and action. For those are the human ‘dealings’ relevant to truth (CP 5. 416).

Once we get leverage on the concept of truth in this way, we are taken to the distinctively pragmatist idea that a true belief would be ‘indefeasible’; or would not be improved upon; or would never lead to disappointment; or would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence. A true belief is the belief we would come to, were we to inquire as far as we could on a matter.

Peirce was also clear that the ‘we’ in question had to be seen as encompassing everyone. Since individuals have finite lives, ‘logicality inexorably requires that our interests shall *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community’ (W3: 284). Logic is rooted in a ‘social principle,’ for investigation into what is true is not a private interest but an interest ‘as wide as the community can turn out to be’ (CP 5.357).

William James, the other co-founder of pragmatism, sparred with Peirce and promoted a view on which the community in question could be as small as an individual. In his most contentious articulation of that view, he argued that if one *needs* to believe something, then one *ought* to believe it, even if there is no evidence in its favor.¹ Beliefs are true for an individual: ‘Any idea upon which we can ride [...] any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor, is [...] true *instrumentally*’ (1907 [1975]: 34). ‘Satisfactorily’, for James, ‘means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic’ (1975 [1907]: 35).

In the early to mid 1900’s, James’ version of pragmatism was dominant. F.C.S. Schiller in Oxford, for instance, followed James in arguing that truth and reality are ‘*wholly plastic*’ (1902: 61). Schiller said, rightly, that his British colleagues took this brand of pragmatism to be ‘sacrilegious’ (1969 [1903]: viii) and he engaged in vicious exchanges with Bradley and Russell.² Russell noted that he too was an empiricist,

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- 1 See Misak (2012) for this interpretation. Peirce (with the third founder of pragmatism, Chauncey Wright), objected: ‘I thought your *Will to Believe* was a very exaggerated utterance, such as injures a serious man very much [...]’ (CWJ12: 171; 1909). James’ view is: ‘Oh, I could not believe so-and-so, because I should be wretched if I did’ (CP 5. 377). At times James puts forward a less radical and more sensible view. See especially his ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, in which he articulates a view very similar to Peirce’s. But the radical view was what he was known for and what pragmatism was known as.
 - 2 Russell’s, for instance, was put into ‘a state of fury’ over Schiller’s ‘impertinence’ in writing a piece on logic when ‘he neither knows nor respects the subject’ (1992 [1909]: 292) The work in question seems to have been Schiller’s 1902 ‘Axioms as Postulates’. That was not even Schiller’s most impertinent attack on logic – that is his 1912 *Formal Logic: A Scientific and Social Problem*.

and so was sympathetic with pragmatism's self-understanding as a method that turns its back on *a priori* reasoning and turns towards concrete facts and consequences (1992 [1966]: 196). Nonetheless, he thought that James's account of truth was seriously defective.³ He notes that on James view, there must be a way of telling when the consequences of a belief are useful:

We must suppose that [...] the consequences of entertaining the belief are better than those of rejecting it. In order to know this, we must know what are the consequences of entertaining it, and what are the consequences of rejecting it; we must know also what consequences are good, what bad, what consequences are better, and what worse. (1992 [1966]: 201)

This, of course, is a very tall order, which Russell immediately illustrates. The consequences of believing the doctrine of the Catholic faith might make one happy 'at the expense of a certain amount of stupidity and priestly domination' (1992 [1966]: 201) but it is entirely unclear how we are to weigh these benefits and burdens against each other. The effects of Rousseau's doctrines had far-reaching effects on Europe, but how do we disentangle what the effects have been? Even if we could do that, whether we take them to be good or bad depends on our political views.

In a related objection, Russell points out that one can take 'works' or 'pays' in two very different ways. In science, a hypothesis works if we can deduce a number of verifiable hypotheses from it. But for James, a hypothesis works if 'the effects of believing it are good, including among the effects [...] the emotions entailed by it or its perceived consequences, and the actions to which we are prompted by it or its perceived consequences'. As Russell goes on to note, 'This is a totally different conception of 'working', and one for which the authority of scientific procedure cannot be invoked' (1992 [1966]: 210).

Moore also interrogates the linkage between the true and the useful. If usefulness is a property that may come and go, then 'a belief, which occurs at several different times, may be true at some of the times at which it occurs, and yet untrue at others' (1992 [1907]:183). The truth of a belief, that is, will vary from time to time and from culture to culture. Moore thinks that the idea that truth is not a stable property of beliefs is an anathema.

Lewis and Quine

The objections of Russell and Moore were fatal for James' brand of pragmatism. Peirce's version, scribbled down in his cold attic, was only to properly see the light of day decades after his death when C.I. Lewis resurrected it. Lewis is the bridge between classical and contemporary pragmatism. Here he is on his 1905 undergraduate education:

3 Sometimes Russell attacks a pragmatist strawman in a pretty irresponsible way. For instance, he quips: 'The skepticism embodied in pragmatism is that which says "Since all beliefs are absurd, we may as well believe what is most convenient"' (1992 [1909]: 280). James never went near that thought.

In my third and final year, I took the famous course in metaphysics which James and Royce divided between them and in which each gave some attention to shortcomings of the other's views. It was immense. [...] I should be glad to think that the 'conceptual pragmatism' of *Mind and the World-Order* had its roots in that same ground; indeed the general tenor of my own philosophic thinking may have taken shape under the influence of that course. (1968a: 5)

When Lewis returned to Harvard as a faculty member in 1920, he for two years 'practically lived with' Peirce's 'manuscript remains'⁴ and it is that Peircean, naturalized Kantian pragmatism that emerges so clearly in his own work.

One of the gravest injustices in the history of modern philosophy is the relegation of Lewis to the dustbin of foundationalism and what Sellars later called the Myth of the Given.⁵ Here is how he puts his view in the 1929 *Mind and the World Order*:

The whole body of our conceptual interpretations form a sort of hierarchy or pyramid with the most comprehensive, such as those of logic, at the top, and the least general such as ['all swans are birds'] etc, at the bottom; that with this complex system of interrelated concepts, we approach particular experiences and attempt to fit them, somewhere and somehow, into its preformed patterns. Persistent failure leads to readjustment [...] The higher up a concept stands in our pyramid, the more reluctant we are to disturb it, because the more radical and far-reaching the results will be ... The decision that there are no such creatures as have been defined as 'swans' would be unimportant. The conclusion that there are no such things as Euclidean triangles, would be immensely disturbing. And if we should be forced to realize that nothing in experience possesses any stability – that our principle, 'Nothing can both be and not be,' was merely a verbalism, applying to nothing more than momentarily – that denouement would rock our world to its foundations. (1956 [1929]: 305-6)

This passage is likely to stun the Quinean, as not many have noticed that Quine's naturalized epistemology is identical to his teacher Lewis'. Davidson, who was Quine's student, offers the following explanation of why Quine failed to give credit where it was due:

I do think that C.I. Lewis had a tremendous influence on Quine, but Quine doesn't realize it. The explanation for that is that Quine had no training in philosophy and so when he took Lewis's course in epistemology, he took for granted that this is what everybody knows about epistemology. Quine didn't realize that Lewis was any different from everyone else [...] I don't think he realized any of this, but you can find most of Quine's epistemology in C.I. Lewis minus the analytic-synthetic distinction. Epistemology naturalized is very close to the heart of C.I. Lewis. (DAVIDSON, 2004: 237)

4 (1968a: 16) Peirce's papers had been delivered to Harvard by Peirce's widow. There was some hope that, given Lewis' interests, he would put the countless boxes of papers in order. He declined to do that, but he very clearly read and absorbed the contents of those boxes.

5 See Misak (forthcoming) for a sustained argument for how Lewis did not adopt a foundationalist view of the given and how he did not adopt the traditional distinction between the analytic and the synthetic.

Whatever the causes, let us call this water under the empiricist bridge and move on the story of how pragmatism unfolds. Lewis and Quine are responsible for a modernization of Peirce's pragmatism, on which inquiry, as Peirce puts it, 'is not standing upon the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present. Here I will stay till it begins to give way' (CP 5. 589).

Quine, of course, did frequently say that he was a pragmatist. He distinguishes his pragmatism from that of others by denying what he took to be a dogma of empiricism embedded in their views: the analytic-synthetic distinction:

Carnap, Lewis, and others take a pragmatic stand on the question of choosing between language forms, scientific frameworks; but their pragmatism leaves off at the imagined boundary between the analytic and the synthetic. In repudiating such a boundary I espouse a more thorough pragmatism. (1951: 46)

Had he read any Peirce, he would have seen that Peirce too was resolutely against the analytic-synthetic distinction. His holism was complete – matters of mathematics and logic are part of our body of belief, subject to change in light of the surprise of experience, which he thought could be had in diagrammatic or proof contexts.

Lewis was in full agreement with Peirce, despite Quine and others railing against what they said was a traditional distinction between the analytic and synthetic embedded in Lewis' view. Lewis' account of the analytic or the *a priori* is pragmatic. There is nothing necessary or unrevisable about our definitions and framework. Lewis differs from Peirce only in that he thought we could choose different frameworks, whereas we have seen that Peirce thought there was but one framework.

Davidsonian pragmatism

In 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' Davidson identifies what he sees as the final dogma of empiricism, which is found in Carnap, Lewis *and* Quine. This is the dichotomy between conceptual scheme and empirical content. One thing wrong with the distinction is that scheme cannot be pulled apart from content. As Peirce argued, all we can say about our inputs is that they impinge upon us. As soon as we acknowledge them, we form a belief or a judgment and bring to that input all our capacities and interests. Davidson and Peirce are one in thinking that you cannot distinguish our conceptual framework and unconceptualized content.

The second thing wrong with the distinction is that it can play out in 'conceptual relativism' - the idea that there are a number of incommensurable conceptual schemes whose task it is to organize unconceptualized empirical input (1974: 5-6). Davidson argues that the fact that we can translate across what we think are different conceptual schemes and understand old scientific theories even after massive conceptual change suggests that there are no incommensurable schemes. He rejects the idea that we in some way choose a framework or a language which enables us to interpret and give sense to what James called the booming buzzing experience, or as Davidson so nicely puts it: 'its classmates like surface irritations, sensations and sense data' (1974: 15).

In place of that picture, Davidson puts forward something very similar to Peirce's pragmatist position. While what counts as real is relative to our ways of organizing and conceptualizing experience, there is only one framework. We might as well, I

suggest, call it the human framework. That is, what Davidson adds to Peirce is the argument for there being only one framework: we can translate and understand across languages and times and hence we are all part of one deliberation or inquiry.

Davidson takes the pragmatist account of truth with the Jamesian (or Deweyan or Rortian) idea that truth is 'the merely useful or approved' (2000: 71). He is right to think this a 'hopeless idea' (2000: 67). But he nonetheless sees an insight even in this kind of pragmatist view: it has 'the merit of relating the concept of truth to human concerns, like language, belief, thought, and intentional action, and it is these connections which make truth the key to how mind apprehends the world' (2000: 73).

Had he known more about Peirce, he would have seen the better side of this insight. Peirce and Davidson are also one in being set against theories of truth that try to do too much. Davidson thinks it a mistake - a 'folly' - to try to define truth. Like Peirce, he thought that this 'does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it: we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, desire, cause and action' (1996: 265). He agrees with the pragmatist of his time, Richard Rorty, about truth and justification: 'As Rorty has put it, 'nothing counts as justification unless by reference to something we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence' (2006 [1983]: 228). Rorty, in 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth', tried to bring Davidson fully into his pragmatist camp (1991: 126f). But Rorty is with Quine in holding fast to the last dogma of empiricism - that there are different conceptual schemes we might choose from to organize experience - and he is in the grip of that 'hopeless' Jamesian/Deweyan pragmatist idea that the truth is what is approved.

While Davidson might well have had residual quarrels with Peirce over the concept of truth⁶, I want to suggest that it is Peirce's position, more or less, that he brought to Oxford. Once we give up the third, scheme-content dogma of empiricism, Davidson says, 'it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism' (1974: 11). What is left, I suggest, is Peircean pragmatism: a naturalized account of truth and knowledge, on which we deal with anomalies or the surprise of experience against, in Davidson's words, 'a background of common beliefs and a going method of translation' (1974: 18). We assume general agreement on a shared body of beliefs, against which disagreement can make itself manifest. On this view, 'it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error' by endorsing that shared background of belief: 'if we want to understand others, we must count them as right in most matters' (1974: 19). What we do is revise in light of recalcitrant experience, coming to beliefs that better stand up to the pressures of experience and argument. This is the Peircean pragmatist account of truth - an account that does not define truth, but rather, gets a fix on the concept by seeing how it is related to our practices of belief, inquiry, and action.

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6 Perhaps the central difference is over whether truth is a goal of inquiry. Davidson says not (2000: 67).

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