

Two Genealogies of Action in Pragmatism

Duas Genealogias da Ação no Pragmatismo

Russell B. Goodman

Regents Professor
Department of Philosophy
University of New Mexico – USA
rgoodman@unm.edu

Abstract: My thesis is that there are two distinct streams of concern with action in the pragmatist tradition. The first of these streams was identified by Peirce, as he considered the origins of his early views about concepts and belief. The second stream runs through the writing and career of John Dewey and can be divided into two smaller streams, one in which action is conceived as intelligent bodily activity, another in which action is conceived of as “growth,” “self-expression,” or “finding one’s way.”

Key-words: Action. Dewey. Education. Peirce. Pragmatism.

Resumo: *Minha tese é que há dois afluentes distintos relacionados à preocupação com a ação na tradição pragmatista. O primeiro desses afluentes foi identificado por Peirce, quando buscava sua origem em sua visão inicial sobre conceitos e crenças. O segundo afluente percorre os escritos e a carreira de John Dewey e pode ser dividido em dois cursos menores, um no qual a ação é concebida como atividade corporal inteligente e o outro, no qual a ação é concebida como “crescimento”, “auto-expressão” ou “encontrando seu caminho”.*

Palavras-chave: *Ação. Dewey. Educação. Peirce. Pragmatismo.*

The term *pragmatism* derives from the Greek verb meaning ‘to do’, and Greek nouns meaning a deed, act, or affair.¹ This paper considers the paths the people we call pragmatists followed in coming to this focus on action. William James famously said in the subtitle to his book *Pragmatism* that pragmatism is a “new name for some old ways of thinking.” While it is more than that, I believe, here I want to consider some of these older ways as they contribute to pragmatism’s intense concern with action. My thesis is that there are two distinct streams of that concern in what we now know as the pragmatist tradition. The first of these streams was identified by Peirce himself, as he considered the origins of his early views about concepts and belief. The second stream runs through the writing and career of John Dewey and can be divided into two smaller streams, one in which action is conceived as intelligent bodily activity, another in which action is conceived of as “growth,” “self-expression,” or “finding one’s way.”

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary.*

1. Peirce gives several accounts of the development of his pragmatism. In “What Pragmatism Is” (1905) for example, he considers the Kantian background to his thought in general, and the coherence of Kant’s term *pragmatisch* with his desire to recognize in pragmatism “an inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose” (EP 2:333). While there is no doubt that Peirce’s pragmatism is more than a theory of meaning and belief and that the Kantian influence is pervasive, I want to focus here on a well-known account that Peirce gives a year later, where he discusses not Kant but Alexander Bain, and where action is centrally in focus. In 1906, in a long letter to the editor of *The Nation* that was never published, Peirce writes that “the rivulets at the head of the river of pragmatism are easily traced back to almost any desired antiquity” and illustrates the point by citing as predecessors Socrates, Aristotle, and Berkeley. He also presents an account of more recent developments, centering on “The Metaphysical Club” in Cambridge, which included William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Chauncey Wright, and Nicholas St. John Green. It was Green, Peirce writes, who often urged the importance of applying Bain’s definition of belief, as “that upon which a man is prepared to act.” From this definition, pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary; so that I am disposed to think of him as the grandfather of pragmatism (EP 2:399).²

Alexander Bain (1818-1903) was a Scottish philosopher and psychologist, whose *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), were leading psychology texts in English throughout most of the second half of the nineteenth century. Bain criticized James Mill’s view that belief was an amalgam of intellect and feeling “strongly associated in the mind.” Rather, Bain held, belief is a matter of the will, a development of our active nature, rooted in our bodies. Noting that we believe things we are not acting on, Bain added that a belief is “an attitude or disposition of preparedness to act” (PCC 2:9). Still, as he put it in the third edition of *The Emotions and the Will* (1875), “action is the basis, and ultimate criterion, of belief” (PCC 2:11).

It was not only Green and Peirce who were thinking about Bain in the early eighteen seventies, but Chauncey Wright, a leading member of the club, who used Bain’s book on *Mental Science* in a course of lectures on psychology at Harvard in 1870. Wright argued that Bain’s theory of belief blends with his own evolutionary account of knowledge, according to which “our knowledges and rational beliefs result, *truly and literally*, from the survival of the fittest among our original and spontaneous beliefs...” Wright praised Bain for departing from the received view that beliefs are “purely intellectual,” and for seeing them “as phases of the will; or as the tendencies we have to [...] *act* on our simplest, most limited experiences” (PCC 2:16-17).

What does Peirce mean in stating that pragmatism is “merely a corollary” of Bain’s view? In his classic paper “Alexander Bain and the Genealogy of Pragmatism,” Max Fisch argues that by “pragmatism” Peirce meant the two articles he published in 1877 and 1878, “The Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” where he states:

Thus, we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. (EP 1:131)

² James cites the same figures as predecessors in *Pragmatism*, published the following year. See: JAMES, William. *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 30.

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (EP 1:132)

Fisch explains the connection between Bain and Peirce as follows:

if the essence of a belief is a habit or disposition to act, then different beliefs are distinguished by the different habits of action they involve [...]; 'the rule for clarifying a proposition (whether believed or not) is to refer it to the habits of action in which the belief of it would consist.' (PCC 2:22)

There are really two moves here that Fisch is attributing to Peirce: defining belief in terms of action, *a la* Bain, but also and more radically, defining *propositions* or the contents of beliefs in terms of action. If one were a platonist about propositions, one would hold that they had nothing essentially to do with action, but one might quite happily hold that beliefs, states of human agents, were best understood in terms of action.³ In any case, the shift in Peirce's thinking that he attributes to the encounter with Bain is profound. For whereas in the 1860's Peirce had conceived of signification as an abstract process, in the 1870's he comes to think of it as a concrete process of inquiry guided by and issuing in action (PCC 2:23).

2. I have been addressing the question: where does the action in pragmatism come from, and considering one line of answer: from Bain, through Peirce. According to this narrative, Peirce becomes a pragmatist when he takes up Bain's theory of belief as action. In the second more complicated narrative I wish now to set out, I consider John Dewey, who did not live in Cambridge, was not a member of the metaphysical club, and who first emerged on the philosophical scene as a follower of Hegel — and hence as anathema to the pragmatists, particularly to William James. For our purposes, what is particularly interesting about Dewey is that he emphasizes action from early on, well before he "becomes a pragmatist"; and that he then finds that his already established views about action, in education for example, fit naturally with the emerging pragmatist theory of inquiry he learns from William James. Dewey's turn to pragmatism is usually dated to the publication of *Studies in Logical Theory* in 1903 — when he was 44 years old, and had been a professor at the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago since the 1880's. In most of what follows I will be examining Dewey's concern with action before this pragmatist turn.

After graduating from the University of Vermont in 1879, Dewey taught high school in Oil City, Pennsylvania and then for a year in his hometown of Burlington, Vermont. He was, like his mother, a devout Christian. A former student remembers both how undisciplined the boys in his class were, and "how long and fervent was the prayer with which he opened each school day."⁴ In 1882, Dewey enrolled as a graduate student

³ In "The Principle of Pragmatism: Peirce's Formulations and Examples," Christopher Hookway, states that Peirce's pragmatic principle is "a rule for obtaining reflective clarity about the content of ideas, concepts, propositions, beliefs, hypotheses, etc." (PCC 2:314). Beliefs are thus only part of that to which the principle applies.

⁴ DYKHUIZEN, George. *The Life and Mind of John Dewey*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, p. 26.

at Johns Hopkins, where he found the Hegelian George Sylvester Morris more to his taste than the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, or the young and eccentric logician Charles Sanders Peirce. As a professor at Michigan in the 1880's – in the decade James was developing his psychology and Peirce was publishing the papers that would be known as pragmatic, Dewey was a Christian Hegelian who argued that absolute idealism is “identical with the theological teaching of Christianity.” He taught Bible classes, published in liberal Christian journals such as the *Andover Review* and gave talks on such topics as “Christ and Life,” and “The Obligation to Knowledge of God”.⁵

Dewey fell away from Christianity after his marriage in 1892 and move to the University of Chicago in 1894, but there remained a powerful layer of moral striving in his thinking, a sense that great goals for society and for individuals might be achieved. The transition from Christianity was a gradual one, for even at the end of the 1890's, in the era of his revolutionary laboratory school at the University of Chicago, and some of his most radical educational writings, Dewey was still comfortable talking about the “kingdom of God.” A case in point is the conclusion to his revolutionary manifesto, “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), where Dewey writes:

I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.

I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God. (EW 95)

“My Pedagogic Creed” is an extremely rich short work that contains the essential ideas of Dewey's mature theory of education as developed in *Democracy and Education* some 20 years later. It incorporates the new psychology that Dewey studied at Hopkins and learned about from James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), and that is the basis for his seminal paper, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” published in 1896 in the *Psychological Review*. The new psychology portrays the human being as responding to stimuli with actions, a view that Dewey considers fundamentally correct but insufficiently freed from old dualisms of mind and body, passive sensation and active response. He proposes to replace the stimulus-response “reflex arc” with an organically developing “sensori-motor circuit” (EW 96). Taking a cue from James's *Principles of Psychology*, he writes: “it is just as true to say that the sensation of sound arises from a motor response as that the running away is a response to the sound” (EW 101). There are not separate sensations and responses but a nexus or organic circuit that includes each, but not as separable parts.

“My Pedagogic Creed” sets out the education appropriate for a human being conceived neither as a mind attached to a body, nor as a mechanism responding to stimuli, but as a “co-ordination” of “strictly correlative and contemporaneous” stimuli and responses” (EW 109). Dewey writes:

I believe that the active side precedes the passive in the development of the child nature; that expression comes before conscious impression; that the mus-

⁵ WESTBROOK, Robert B. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 22.

cular development precedes the sensory; that movements come before conscious sensations; I believe that consciousness is essentially motor or impulsive; that conscious states tend to project themselves in action. (EW 91)

From this psychological picture Dewey draws a pedagogical conclusion: that education must foster – and guide – the active nature of the child. It must not stunt its development or hold back the child’s natural active responses. The neglect of this principle, Dewey writes, “is the cause of a large part of the waste of time and strength in school work. The child is thrown into a passive, receptive, or absorbing attitude. [...] he is not permitted to follow the law of his nature; the result is friction and waste” (EW 91).

If we take the expression “not permitted to follow the law of his nature” out of context, we can see why Dewey might be taken to maintain that the child should be allowed to do anything he or she wants. So it is important to remember the role of the teacher that Dewey had stressed at the end of the “My Pedagogic Creed.” The teacher’s role is to find expressive forms for the child’s impulses, a task that has two aspects: finding what the child’s impulses or interests are, and finding the social forms that will allow them to develop. Speaking of this second, social aspect of the task, Dewey states that we don’t know what the child’s instincts and tendencies “mean until we can translate them into their social equivalents.” But of course Dewey equally stresses the importance of following the “law” of the child’s nature as expressed in her activities: “Save as the efforts of the educator connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative independent of the educator, education becomes reduced to a pressure from without” (EW 85).

Autonomous and self-motivated activity is thus the real achievement of education, an achievement that shows its value in the present as well as the future. Education, Dewey states, is “a process of living and not a preparation for future living,” and is therefore not essentially instrumental. Education is composed of “forms of life...that are worth living for their own sake” (EW 87).

What are some of these forms? Talking, playing house or baseball, exploring by digging or walking or collecting, building something, cooking. Children are doing these things before they come to school, and the school must begin, Dewey holds, with “the child’s own social activities.” A special subject such as history should not be introduced too early, for it must be grounded in the present if it is not to be “thrown into the distant past and [thereby become] dead and inert” (EW 89). History makes sense, Dewey argues, only against a background of human activity

The primary basis of education is in the child’s powers at work along the same general constructive lines as those which have brought civilization into being. [...] the only way to make the child conscious of his social heritage is to enable him to perform those fundamental types of activity which make civilization what it is (EW 89-90).

Notice that Dewey makes both an epistemological and a pedagogical claim about action when he states that *performing* “fundamental types of activity” is essential to the “social heritage” that includes the subjects we call geography, anthropology, history, chemistry, and biology. The claim can be taken as instrumental – performing these activities is a first step in the path to an understanding of the social heritage; but it may also be taken – in accord with the “organic unity” doctrine of his “Reflex Arc” paper – as the stronger claim that a certain fundamental understanding of the heritage comes directly in the

activity, and that without it the more specialized studies of the school make no sense. When, eleven years later and as a full-fledged pragmatist, Dewey writes that “we have to do a doctrine to *know* its truth”⁶ he is restating and recontextualizing this central tenet of his early philosophy of education.

Action and doing were central to the primary school at the University of Chicago that Dewey and his wife directed. “A Pedagogical Experiment,” published in *Kindergarten Magazine* in 1896, describes the school as a place where children of various ages work together on projects that are treated “not as studies, but as factors in the child life. The child comes to school to *do* [Dewey’s italics]; to cook, to sew, to work with wood...” These practical activities are not unknown in the schools, he admits, but they are usually treated as adjuncts to or secondary parts of education. Dewey’s innovation is to give them a central place. From occupations such as cooking beans, potatoes and porridge, growing plants, or using a lever, “more formal studies” emerge naturally (EW 245). The measuring necessary for sewing teaches mathematical skills, the power of a lever opens up the role of tools in human history, cooking rice or wheat leads naturally to physics and chemistry, and to the civilizations based on these foods. Dewey’s “Plan of Organization of the University Primary School” accordingly lists not subjects but activities: “Boil rice, Boil Potatoes, Bake potatoes, Crush Wheat, Porridges [...] Beans and peas — boiled, Beans and peas — baked, Beans and peas — in soup” (EW 237). If Dewey were giving a talk in Andalusia he would not doubt have pointed out the cultures and histories that are instantiated in and represented by olla de trigo, las habas a la granadina, and moros y cristianos.

3. The second strand of action in Dewey’s philosophy is more elusive, but we have already encountered it in his idea that education is to give expression to the “nature” of the child, and that it is to be achieved through “forms of life worth living for their own sake.” (EW 87). Education, as a quest for a certain kind of life, is thus a form of “moral perfectionism” in the sense identified by Stanley Cavell: it is concerned with the “culture or cultivation” of the child, who is to embark on a “journey of ascent” to something better or ideal. “Perfectionism’s obsession with education,” Cavell writes, “expresses its focus on finding one’s way rather than on getting oneself or another to take the way.”⁷ Hilary Putnam points to this strand in Dewey’s thought when he writes: “the solution to social problems, Dewey argues, requires not that we *tell* other people what to do, but that we release their energies so that they will be able to act for themselves.”⁸ Finding one’s way or releasing one’s energies — which Dewey variously calls “interest,” “self-expression,” “growth” and following the law of one’s own nature — is a form of action that is as important in Dewey’s philosophy of education as such physical activities as

⁶ “Does Reality Possess Practical Character? (1908). *In: Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*. Ed.: Russell B. Goodman. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 83.

⁷ CAVELL, Stanley. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 31.

⁸ PUTNAM, Hilary. *Renewing Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 198.

running or sewing or cooking beans. There are many sources for this “romantic” idea in Dewey, but in concluding this essay I want to pay particular attention to the role played by action in the writings of a philosopher Dewey respected and cited, the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. When in his great address on education, “The American Scholar,” Emerson states that “one thing in the world of value is the active soul,” he is speaking of a kind of activity that Dewey sought to release in the school.

There is no doubt that Dewey recognized a kinship between his views on education and Emerson’s, for he cites him in the chapter called “Education as Growth” in *Democracy and Education* (1916). Dewey recognizes a kinship between his doctrines and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s emphasis on the child’s innate propensities and natural activities, but he criticizes Rousseau for thinking that the child’s natural development will inevitably lead to her education. Emerson, on the other hand, strikes just the proper balance between respect for the child’s powers and social discipline. The true principle of respect for immaturity cannot be better put than in the words of Emerson:

Respect the child, be not too much his parent. [...] Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself [...] The two points in a boy’s training are, to keep his *naturel* and train off all but that; to keep his *naturel*, but stop off his uproar, fooling, and horse-play; keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points.” And as Emerson goes on to show this reverence for childhood and youth instead of opening up an easy and easy-going path to the instructors, “involves at once immense claims on the time, the thought, on the life of the teacher. (MW9: 57)

Dewey is quoting from Emerson’s late essay “Education,” where what he calls the child’s *naturel* takes the place of what he elsewhere calls “self-reliance.” Like other romantics, Emerson is concerned with the development or *bildung* of the person. Whether conceived as finding one’s way, releasing one’s energies, expression, keeping one’s *naturel*, or simply growth, the activity of “building up one’s being” (as Emerson calls it)⁹ is also central to Dewey’s conception of education.

Dewey valued Emerson not only as an educational theorist but more generally as a philosopher. In his potent address at the Emerson centenary in 1903, “Ralph Waldo Emerson: Philosopher of Democracy,” Dewey states that Emerson is “the one citizen of the new world fit to have his name uttered in the same breath with that of Plato” (MW 3:191). (This is an especially remarkable statement considering Dewey’s emerging pragmatism and his respect for William James.)¹⁰ Dewey sees Emerson as a balanced thinker who emphasizes both “the power of thought” and “the test of trial by the service rendered the present and immediate experience.” He also sees him as an incipient pragmatist, who “finds truth in the highway, in the untaught endeavor, the unexpected idea.” These highways and “untaught endeavors” are the fabric of Deweyan education.

In Emerson’s earliest and most powerful statement about education, “The American Scholar,” he enumerates three elements in the education of the scholar: nature, “the mind of the past” as expressed in books, and “action” (CW 1:59). Action, Emerson

⁹ See CW 2: 189.

¹⁰ James was admitted to Dewey’s American pantheon after his death in 1910. See MW 6:96-7.

continues, is a “dictionary” of experience with which the scholar works, and the scholar must be “free and brave” in order both to achieve and to use it. Action so conceived is moral and perfectionist: it is the striving for a goal the achievement of which requires courage and other virtues. Emerson’s moral perfectionism appears also in his statement that: “The one thing in the world of value, is, the active soul,—the soul, free, sovereign, active. This [...] every man contains within him, although in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn” (CW 1:56). The active soul, the *only* thing in the world of value, according to Emerson, is a power of original, interested activity that everyone has but few develop or utilize.

This inherent if potential power of the self is the subject of Dewey’s essay “Interest in Relation to the Training of the Will” (1896), where “interest” is Dewey’s word for what Emerson calls “the active soul.” Dewey writes:

The genuine principle of interest is the principle of the recognized identity of the fact or proposed line of action with the self; that it lies in the direction of the agent’s own growth, and is, therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself. Let this condition of identification once be secured, and we neither have to appeal to sheer strength of will, nor do we have to occupy ourselves with making things interesting to the child. (EW 117-18)

“Making things interesting” is precisely not what the educator tries to do, for approaching a subject in this way presupposes that it is not interesting in the first place. Dewey’s point is that the child naturally finds certain things interesting, and this will incline the child toward a “line of action.” The Deweyan child, no less than the Emersonian or Nietzschean hero, “imperiously” demands the growth or expression this line of action will achieve.

Dewey asserts a very tight relation between action and self-expression: the proposed “line of action” is *identical* with the self. Interest sets the direction in which the self finds expression (and correspondingly the self does not find expression in that in which it has no interest). Interest is not, like pleasure, a psychological state that might or might not be related to action, but is, rather, “active, propulsive. [...] we take interest, we get pleasure” (EW 20). Education is thus the quest for a truly interesting life, a life in which we actively *take interest*, rather than a life where interest is absent or deferred.

It is to make this point that Dewey introduces Emerson into the text of “Interest in Relation to the Training of the Will.” Most schools, Dewey states, attempt to make children interested in their work through fear of the teacher or the hope of future rewards, rather than through the intrinsic interest of the subject matter. This induces a type of character

illustrated by Emerson at the beginning of his essay on “Compensation,” where he holds up the current doctrine of compensation as virtually implying that, if you only sacrifice yourself enough now, you will be permitted to indulge yourself a great deal more in the future; or that if you are only good now (goodness consisting in attention to what is uninteresting) you will have, at some future time, a great many more pleasing interests — that is, may then be bad. (EW 115)

Dewey uses Emerson’s diagnosis about “compensation” in religion to make the point that education must find its rewards in the life of learning itself, not in some future reward that the learning will bring. Interest as active engagement is the mark, or form, of such a life.

The description of such a life has its culmination not only in *Democracy and Education*, written when Dewey was a fully-fledged pragmatist, but in his late, great pragmatist work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934). One has only to look at the first chapter of that book to see, as it were, the grown up Deweyan child, an “intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, [...] artistically engaged.” Artistic engagement so conceived is not just mechanical or habitual engagement, but rather “courses of action in which through successive deeds there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating toward an end ...” (LW 10:45). These courses of action are the descendents of the self-expressive “line of action” of the child that Dewey wanted to respect and build up in the school.

I offer a brief summary of the paper: I have distinguished two genealogies of action in pragmatism: one running through Bain’s theory of belief, nurtured in the Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, and expanded to include meaning as well as belief in Charles Peirce’s groundbreaking papers of the 1870s; 2) a second, consisting of two strands running through Dewey’s philosophy of education. In the first of these strands, doing is taken to be central to learning, so that one must “do a doctrine to know its truth.” In the second, romantic or perfectionist strand, action is conceived as self-expression, growth, finding one’s way or acting for oneself. This strand runs through Dewey’s aesthetic as well as his educational writings and, as Putnam suggests in “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy,” is an essential part of his solution to social problems.¹¹

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Russell B. Goodman

Department of Philosophy
University of New Mexico
MSC 03 2140
Albuquerque, NM 87131
USA

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