

Pragmatism and the Loss of Innocence¹

Pragmatismo e a Perda da Inocência

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Abstract: What is it about pragmatism that has from its inception been found disturbing? I am reminded of Daniel Dennett's remark in his 2000 American Philosophical Association Presidential Address that "many people dislike Darwinism in their guts." There is something about pragmatism that has always been found deeply troubling and I believe it is related to what troubles people about Darwinism. Inspired by Dennett's treatment of the idea and impact of evolutionary theory in his Presidential Address and in his book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, I will look at pragmatism in that light and will suggest that it may be even more threatening than Darwinism to traditional western values and the glorification of individualism. I will suggest that pragmatism is a naturalistic philosophy that presupposes a radical evolutionism and that, try as they might to substitute a belief in an exuberant meliorism for religious faith, pragmatists must eventually face the fact that everything is fleeting and that ignorance will prevail. In fact, taking the long view of things, there really is no future. But, surprisingly perhaps, this is no cause for a pessimistic outlook. Futility, in the long run, is no excuse for despair today. Interlaced with these somewhat didactic themes, I will include some comparison of Dennett's parsimonious philosophy with the views of the original pragmatists, especially with Peirce's semiotic pragmatism, and I will briefly consider whether the naturalism running from Quine to Dennett is a branch of neo-pragmatism that has been largely unrecognized.

Key-words: (neo-)pragmatism; Peirce; Dennett; Darwinism; evolutionism; naturalism

Resumo: *O que há com o pragmatismo que desde seu nascimento é considerado perturbador? Lembro-me da observação de Daniel Dennett, em seu Pronunciamento Presidencial da American Philosophical Association, que "muitas pessoas detestam visceralmente o darwinismo". Há algo com o pragmatismo que sempre foi considerado profundamente incômodo, e eu*

¹ This paper was presented to 5th International Meeting on Pragmatism at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo in November 2002. An early variant form was presented in October 2002 in Shanghai at a conference sponsored by the Philosophy Department of Fudan University.

acredito que isso esteja relacionado com o que incomoda as pessoas no darwinismo. Inspirado no tratamento de Dennett, em seu Pronunciamento Presidencial e em seu livro Darwin's Dangerous Idea, da idéia e do impacto da teoria evolucionária, olbarei para o pragmatismo sob essa luz e sugerirei que ele pode ser ainda mais ameaçador do que o darwinismo, para os valores tradicionais do ocidente e para a glorificação do individualismo. Sugirirei que o pragmatismo é uma filosofia naturalista que pressupõe um evolucionismo radical e que, tentem o quanto puderem substituir uma crença em um meliorismo exuberante pela fé religiosa, os pragmatistas devem conseqüentemente encarar o fato de que tudo é passageiro e de que a ignorância prevalecerá. Mas, talvez surpreendentemente, isto não é causa para uma perspectiva pessimista. A futilidade, em longo prazo, não é desculpa para o desespero, hoje em dia. Incluirei, entrelaçada com estes temas algo didáticos, alguma comparação da filosofia parcimoniosa de Dennett com as visões dos pragmatistas originais, especialmente com o pragmatismo semiótico de Peirce, e considerarei brevemente se o naturalismo que vem de Quine para Dennett é um ramo neopragmatista que foi amplamente ignorado.

Palavras-chave: (neo)pragmatismo; Peirce; Dennett; darwinismo; evolucionismo; naturalismo

Introduction

The title of this paper may suggest something a little more entertaining than the facts will bear out, but what can be expected, after all, from a paper on pragmatism, especially a Peircean paper? Perhaps there is a little hope for those who can get excited by a fresh idea, however minor, or by a new twist on an old idea. That is the most this paper can promise. This is an excursion into new territory for the author, so what is said will be more suggestive than conclusive — the aim being mainly to show Peirce's pragmatism in a somewhat different light and to point to some unexplored continuities between classical pragmatism and the strands of contemporary philosophy running from Quine to Dennett.

Dennett's Dangerous Philosophy

On December 29, 2000, in New York City, Daniel Dennett delivered his Presidential Address to the Eastern Division of the *American Philosophical Association*. Dennett's undergraduate advisor from Harvard, Willard Van Orman Quine, had died only four days earlier, on Christmas Day, and Dennett dedicated his address to the memory of his old teacher and friend. Quine, more than anyone, had inculcated in Dennett the naturalistic attitude which, as early as 1978, Dennett had characterized as the attitude

...that assumes from the outset that by and large our quotidian beliefs are true and warranted, that epistemology can learn from psychology, and that the best way to derive the canons of justification is to see how good science is done. (DENNETT 1978: 251)

The title of Dennett's Presidential Address was *In Darwin's Wake, Where am I?* It was typical Dennett: a strident defense of his embellished form of Darwinism and a witty but sometimes cavalier treatment of any position that postulates original, non-derivative, intelligence. As I listened to Dennett deliver his address, I found myself thinking that he could almost have been holding forth at the Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 130 years earlier. In part, this was because of Dennett's enthusiasm for the transforming power of Darwin's dangerous idea, his theory of evolution by natural selection, and the sense Dennett conveys that he is on to something new. But it was more than that. Dennett's championing of science over theology, his rejection of ideas that appeal for their support to skyhooks rather than to earth-supported cranes, and, more generally, his unyielding naturalism, which holds that everything, from the original chaos to the most pleasing and profound intellectual creations, is part of the same basic stuff, all brought to mind the way things were for Charles Peirce and his friends in Cambridge in the late 1860s and early 70s.

Having begun to formulate some vague idea of the family ties between Dennett's evolutionary philosophy and pragmatism, it came as a minor surprise when Dennett reminded us how resistant people still are to evolutionism and that, truth be told, "many people dislike Darwinism in their guts." It was no surprise, of course, that lots of people hate the very idea of Darwinism, but my mind had turned to pragmatism and, for the first time, it occurred to me that it might be just as repellent. As I thought about it, I realized that there is indeed something about pragmatism that has always been deeply troubling and it occurred to me that it is not so different from what troubles people about Darwinism.

The Metaphysical Club

This all makes perfect sense if you think about the origins of pragmatism. Imagine what heady times in must have been in the mid-19th century for brilliant young philosophically-minded scientific men like Charles Peirce, William James, and their provocative friend, Chauncy Wright. The successes of experimental science and of new methods of reasoning that appealed to statistical measures were everywhere apparent – but it was all so very new. Bear in mind that as the book of history closed its chapter on the 18th century and opened a chapter for the 19th, William Smith, the son of an English village blacksmith, was fighting a battle to establish that the aesthetically pleasing little objects embedded in the Earth's strata were actually fossilized creatures from bygone eras, and not mere decorative flourishes added by the Creator to spruce up the issue of a hard week's work. Only after this battle had been won could Smith produce the first true geological map, one based on the understanding that the surface of the Earth was in layers that bore characteristic features of the geological period of their formation (WINCHESTER 2001). In other words, it was within a generation of Charles Peirce's birth when Western science began to take seriously that the planet we live on bears witness to a record of geological and biological development and growth that contradicts long established presuppositions deriving from religious stories. This change of view had a profound impact on the goals and methods of science.

These were some of the new ideas, exciting ones, that paved the way for Charles Darwin's famed 1859 *Origin of Species*, published only twenty years after William Smith's

death. Charles Peirce was twenty years old when Darwin's book appeared and was in Louisiana on a field assignment for the US Coast Survey, so he learned only through correspondence of the "immense sensation" it had created in Cambridge. By the time Peirce returned home a few months later, his friend Chauncy Wright had already become a vocal enthusiast for Darwin's theory and Peirce's teacher, and a great friend of the Peirce family, Louis Agassiz, was already becoming the most vocal scientific opponent of the theory of evolution by natural selection.

It is worth noting that forces lining up in Cambridge for and against Darwin were not just academic debaters of distant theories, but were really part of the defining moment that was then occurring in the history of science. (See WIENER 1949, ch. 3 for details re the following two paragraphs. Info also from FISCH 1986, ch. 3, MADDEN 1963, and from BOWLBY 1990.) Chauncy Wright was a computer for the *Nautical Almanac* and a teacher of natural philosophy at Agassiz's Cambridge school for girls. Wright had been a student of Harvard professor Asa Gray, a correspondent of Darwin's and Darwin's chief defender in the United States. Wright, too, had direct dealings with Darwin and even visited him at his home in Down in 1872, a few months after receiving from Darwin a letter asking if he would "take some incidental occasion to consider when a thing may properly be said to be effected by the will of man" (FISCH: 123).

Louis Agassiz was the foremost biologist in America and a teacher, not only of Peirce, but also of Wright and William James (who had travelled with Agassiz on his 1865 Thayer Expedition to Brazil). In 1835, Agassiz had received an honorary doctorate of letters from Trinity College for his radical new theory of the Ice Age at the same meeting of the British Association in Dublin where William Smith was honored for his revolutionary geological map. After Darwin's *Origin* appeared, Agassiz became its principal opponent, and not only in America. In 1871 and '72, with the material support of Charles Peirce's father, Benjamin Peirce, then Superintendent of the US Coast Survey, Agassiz travelled around the tip of South America on a voyage he hoped would provide evidence to refute Darwin's ideas. Darwin knew about Agassiz's expedition and wrote to wish him well, but indicated privately that he understood that Agassiz was driven partly by religious and professional motivations. Agassiz was a staunch creationist and was convinced that Darwin's theory contradicted the truth of religion and, beyond that, he knew that Darwin's views seriously threatened his leadership in the field of zoological classification.

So when Peirce addressed the members of the Metaphysical Club in 1872, shortly after Chauncy Wright's return from visiting with Darwin, and delivered that famous chapter from his new logic book that is said to have been the first enunciation of pragmatism, the context was the Darwinian controversy. And Peirce, James, Wright, Holmes, and the others, were literally in the middle of that controversy. It was for them a living issue. And all of the members, so far as we know, came strongly down on the side of evolution, although some, certainly including Peirce, did not accept Darwin's theory as a fully satisfactory nor complete theory of evolution. Peirce had quickly absorbed that evolutionism could be an antidote to nominalism and associationism, and he was especially attracted by the fact that Darwin's theory was, as he said, "nourished by positive observation" and, therefore, would prove "deadly" to doctrines like Mill's empiricism which was "nothing but a metaphysical point of view." The support evolutionism received from positive observations was key for Peirce. Later, when he struggled to define "pragmatism," he noted that while it is very difficult to say exactly what pragmatism is, it is at least "a sort of instinctive attraction for living facts" (CP 5.64).

Louis Menand's recent Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Metaphysical Club*, helps us understand the context of the birth of pragmatism. He points to two crucial factors, Darwin's theory of evolution and the US Civil War. The evolutionism debate cast considerable doubt on ideas of permanence and brought to the forefront the importance of development. It undermined confidence in absolutes and supported relativist or contextualist thinking. It shifted attention or emphasis from origins to growth and consequences. It forced a reassessment of both science and religion. The US Civil War led to the rejection of failed traditional values and to an unavoidable recognition of the immediate impact of experience and of the significance of action over theory. All of this, Menand says, and I believe correctly, is the soil from which pragmatism sprouted and has received its nourishment.

What is Pragmatism?

When Peirce introduced pragmatism in his 1878 *How to Make Our Ideas Clear* (which Hillary Putnam has referred to as "the manifesto of pragmatism" [BORRADORI 1994: 62]), he intended pragmatism to be an improvement on Descartes' method of sorting out ideas by means of his clearness and distinctness test. Peirce announced that "it is now time to formulate the method of attaining to a more perfect clearness of thought, such as we see and admire in the thinkers of our own time" (CP 5.390). This was a continuation of the anti-Cartesian reconstruction of philosophy that Peirce had begun with his *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* series of 1868 and '69. In one respect, Peirce's purpose for improving on Descartes seemed almost Wittgensteinian in its therapeutic intent: "It is terrible," he pointed out, "to see how a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery..." (CP 5.393). More generally, however, Peirce's purpose was to make philosophy more scientific and to provide a means for cleaning up metaphysics. When William James introduced pragmatism by name in 1898 he had a similar purpose in mind: "The principal of practicalism or pragmatism, as [Peirce] called it [...] is the clue or compass by following which [...] we may keep our feet upon the proper trail" (McDERMOTT 1967: 348).

So far so good. But it would be disingenuous of me to pretend that it is all so simple. As many of you know, the question "what is pragmatism?" is a vexed one. It was already a problem for Arthur Lovejoy almost one hundred years ago when he wrote about "thirteen pragmatisms." It is a more difficult problem today and certainly not one that can be resolved in this paper – but that doesn't mean that we have to give up. We can at least try to make a few general distinctions (I say "general," because I do not intend to go into specific distinctions such as the differences between Peirce, James, and Dewey on the importance of individual actions or the role of personal satisfaction).

According to Mark Bauerlein (BAUERLEIN 1997), the word "pragmatism" today, is frequently – probably usually – used in reference to a movement or attitude now prevalent within cultural criticism; an intellectual movement that has replaced the concern for clarity of meaning and interest in truth with the advocacy of democracy and the implementation of pragmatic principles. Neopragmatists are intellectual activists; not intellectual commentators who live lives of contemplation. Bauerlein says that this new pragmatism is really not the intellectual movement deriving from Peirce, James, and

Dewey, but a different, though related, movement deriving from Richard Rorty. I assume that Rorty would at least partly object to this and protest that his brand of pragmatism has deep roots extending back to Dewey and James, and surely he would be right – although Bauerlein might reply that there is a lot in James and Dewey that Rorty has intentionally passed over. Rorty’s pragmatism and the many neopragmatisms it has spawned are obviously important for a full understanding of what is happening today, but I will leave that consideration to others.

I will, instead, turn to one of the stalwarts of American philosophy, Richard Robin, who has recently pointed out that it is “commonplace” to notice two principal varieties of pragmatism, one deriving from Peirce and another deriving from James (BRUNNING and FORSTER 1997). Robin refers to Peirce’s variety as “classical” pragmatism and honors it as the “unabashedly” scientific species that has roots tracing back to Greek philosophy. Presumably in the James camp we find F. C. S. Schiller, with his Humanism, and the line of pragmatists running from James, through Dewey, to Rorty – although I think it is generally supposed that Dewey had one foot in each camp.

Robin doesn’t say who is in the so-called Peirce camp, but maybe it is the line of pragmatists, if indeed they are all pragmatists, running from Peirce, through C. I. Lewis and Quine to Davidson and Putnam (and I would now cautiously include Dennett). This seems to be the view of H. O. Mounce in his recent book, *The Two Pragmatisms*. Mounce, like Robin, refers to this Peirce inspired tradition as the “classical pragmatism” – but we should be careful to remember that the term “classical pragmatism” (like the term “classical American philosophy,” an expression defended by Max Fisch) often refers to what many now just call early pragmatism (or early American philosophy). Mounce, like Robin, contrasts Peirce’s pragmatism with that of James and Dewey, running through to Rorty, and, in the final sentence of his book, he delivers a surprisingly harsh judgment on this second pragmatism: “My argument has been that it is not a new philosophy but is a variation on Positivism, a form of extreme Empiricism. It is in conflict with the first Pragmatism, not at incidental points, but in its essentials” (MOUNCE 1997: 231). I believe, though, that we should be a bit cautious with this assessment and remember that Peirce described his own pragmatism as a species of positivism, though with three distinct features: 1) unlike standard positivisms, pragmatism doesn’t regard philosophy as a mere stepping stone to be left behind once we have gained our foothold, but as something of continuing importance once purified; 2) unlike standard positivisms, pragmatism accepts the main body of our instinctive beliefs; and 3) pragmatism embraces scholastic realism. The upshot, Peirce says, is that rather than “merely jeering at metaphysics,” like other positivists, the Peircean pragmatist extracts from metaphysics “a precious essence, which will serve to give life and light to cosmology and physics” (CP 5. 423).

I suppose Mounce might be right when he says that the two pragmatisms conflict in all their essentials – maybe all they have in common are incidentals. Perhaps asking what the varieties of pragmatism have in common is like asking what games have in common, and maybe a Wittgensteinian answer is in order: there is nothing essential to pragmatism although by iterative resemblance pragmatisms can be grouped into a family. Maybe. But I am inclined to think that Mounce is quite mistaken if he really means to say that Peirce’s and James’s pragmatisms conflict in *all* of their essentials. Peirce himself didn’t believe that. But what *can* be said about pragmatisms that is important, maybe essential, and that applies equally to all of them?

I must admit that I can't answer this question with any confidence, but if I had to try I would begin with this: *Pragmatism is the first teleological philosophy to grow out of the Darwinian conclusion that human intelligence is a thoroughly natural development and that human thought and language are means by which we mediate our past and present experiences with future expectations.* By "teleological" here, I mean something quite weak, probably no more than that pragmatism appeals to aims and expectations rather than to origins and material causes (which is not to deny that there are origins and material causes). If we should broaden the scope of pragmatism to include the pragmatics of Charles Morris and Rudolf Carnap, can the core of pragmatism be anything more than an agreement that a satisfactory epistemology has to be based on an understanding that language is a social artifact developed to expedite life both in relation to the physical environment and within society, and that our epistemology must somehow reflect this use and context base of language? I leave it for a future occasion to consider whether these attempts succeed in locating what is common to all pragmatisms (at least classical pragmatisms) and whether they are sufficient to identify a philosophy as a form of pragmatism?

I want to conclude this section on "what pragmatism is" by noting that Peirce, himself, is usually thought to have formulated at least two distinct varieties of pragmatism: his early doctrine most famously spelled out in his 1877–78 *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, and his mature doctrine, dubbed "pragmaticism," first spelled out in 1905 in *The Monist*. One of the key features of the later pragmatism is that it incorporates Peirce's theory of signs, and his semiotic theory of cognition (going back to 1868). He characterized his later pragmatism as a method of ascertaining the meaning of "intellectual concepts," the class of propositional signs he called symbols, and he emphasized the importance of what he called "the *would-acts* of habitual behavior." He could now express pragmatism in a different way: "The whole meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen, once in so often, in the course of experience, under certain kinds of existential circumstances" (CP 5.468). So the meaning of a conception is not to be found in its relation to its referent or object, but rather in conceivable consequences or in the intellectual effect it has on its interpreter, which ultimately will be an intellectual habit.

Dennett and Peirce

The idea that Dennett belongs somehow to the tradition of pragmatism is not new (see, for example, BROOK and ROSS 2002: 4), but there has been little serious exploration of the similarities and differences between Dennett's Darwinism and classical pragmatism, Peirce's pragmatism in particular. It is unclear what benefits might be expected from such a study but one prospect, among others, is that Peirce has something valuable to contribute to cognitive science of the Dennett variety – and that, by itself, would make the effort worthwhile. But the task is too great for this paper, so in the space that remains I will make the merest beginning by providing a sketch of some key elements of Dennett's philosophy which bear comparison with Peirce's. Where I can, I will suggest what Peirce might have done to move the debate forward. Then, to fulfil part of the promise of my title, I'll briefly consider some of the dangers of pragmatism and how we might bear up under their weight.

Dennett falls into the tradition of philosophy that sets itself in opposition to Descartes' two substance ontology. Several of Dennett's signature positions, such as his stand against qualia and his multiple drafts model of consciousness, are put forward as answers to, or improvements on, Descartes. Peirce, too, belongs to this anti-cartesian tradition, in fact it would be fair to say that Peirce helped establish that tradition – certainly in America. In 1868, Peirce began publishing his famous Cognition Series in which he proposed a new platform for philosophy intended as a revolt against Descartes' earlier reconstruction. Richard Bernstein has claimed that there is no important argument in the anti-foundationalist arsenal that is not in that series of papers (BERNSTEIN 1989: 7).

Dennett's philosophy is far more complex and systematic than he is often given credit for. For many years he was known principally for his work on consciousness and for his influential applications of functionalism to AI (Artificial Intelligence). Probably he is most famous among philosophers for his idea of the "intentional stance," his invention for bringing a sort of denatured teleology into predictive and explanatory situations without infecting, he supposes, his ontology.

A signature doctrine of Dennett's is his radical and seemingly reductive naturalism, perhaps sprouting from Quine's essay, "Epistemology Naturalized." It is true that Dennett is very sensitive to being called a material or physical reductionist but the only counter examples I can find are claims that some *narratives* or *explanations* require non-reducible stances. As far as I can tell, Dennett never admits any kind of causal role for the "entities" that are appealed to from these stances (such as intentional states). Dennett used to be comfortable with the label "instrumentalist" with respect to intentional states, and more generally with respect to Folk Psychology, but recently he "has admitted that his ontological intuitions about intentional states are in 'happy disarray'" (BROOK and ROSS 2002: 18). Peirce, of course, has a less parsimonious ontology than Dennett, accepting, as Peirce does, the reality of possibilities (corresponding to his firstness) and laws (corresponding to his thirdness), in addition to actual existents (corresponding to his secondness). As a matter of fact, Dennett frequently sounds as if he also accepts the reality of possibility and even, perhaps, of law, but he is more leery of the reality of other manifestations of Peirce's categories such as feeling and thought. Probably the key difference between Peirce and Dennett on realities other than existing material objects, is that Peirce grants every reality the power to somehow actually affect the course of events whereas Dennett sticks tenaciously to material causation as the one and only kind. But even this difference may be more apparent than real, because Peirce agrees that law, for example, is really nothing without a body, a sheriff, to enforce it.

Over the years, Dennett has taken a growing interest in philosophical Darwinism (and also in biological theory per se) and has come to be better known among the general intelligentsia for his public battles with the late Stephen Jay Gould than for technical contributions to philosophy. In these "Darwin Wars" with Gould and with other evolutionary theorists, Dennett has been an unyielding promoter of adaptationism in biology: the view that whatever is selected in evolutionary processes comes out on top, as it were, because it is the best adapted relative to the "problems" posed by the environment. Dennett, against Gould, holds that "adaptationist reasoning is not optional; it is the heart and soul of evolutionary biology" (DENNETT 1995: 238). Part of Dennett's argument for adaptationism is that it is necessary for explaining the evident designs we find in organisms and, perhaps even more importantly, without it we could not explain why the intentional stance works as a predictive strategy—and it does work. Ultimately,

this brings Dennett to make the claim that intentionality and meaning necessarily derive from “Mother Nature” (BROOK and ROSS 2002: 23).

It is quite difficult to match up Peirce’s views with Dennett’s on these matters, but there are some surprising similarities nevertheless. According to Peirce, we have a power of guessing which, though certainly fallible, is analogous to the instincts of animals. “Man’s mind,” he says, “must have been attuned to the truth of things in order to discover what he has discovered [...] Unless man have a natural bent in accordance with nature’s, he has no chance of understanding nature, at all” (CP 6.477; EP 2:444). It is not clear whether Peirce thought that natural selection was fully sufficient to explain our power of guessing, but he appears to have believed so, at least where the guesses involved science, not metaphysics (CP 6.491).

Dennett’s embrace of adaptationism was influenced by Richard Dawkins. More recently Dennett has become a strong adherent and promoter of another of Dawkins’ ideas, the idea that the basic cultural unit, and the foundation for human personality, is the meme, the cultural analog of the gene. There is a lot of disagreement and confusion about memes, what they are and how they function, but Dennett seems to regard them as “strings of informational code that pass easily from one mind to another” (BROOK and ROSS 2002: 24). They spread something like viruses. Memes are the basic semantic units from which minds can be built up and by means of which language can develop (Ibid.).

In my opinion, it is Dennett’s addition of meme theory to his functionalist Darwinism that brings him and his followers so far into the philosophical territory of Peirce that it now seems almost as inevitable as it is desirable that there will be a return to Peirce’s semiotic pragmatism for the research programs related to Dennett’s fields of philosophy and cognitive science. Indeed this return may already be underway. Quite a few years ago, James Fetzer introduced Peirce into mainstream cognitive science and developed Peirce’s view of minds as semiotic systems. Barbara Von Eckardt also used Peirce’s semiotic philosophy for some of her work in cognitive science. More recently, Terrence Deacon, in his book *The Symbolic Species*, and in subsequent writings, has brought more of Peirce into the debate (and Dennett has begun, however tentatively, to take note of this). Most recently, in a book titled *The Electric Meme*, Robert Aunger has made a crucial but obvious move – that of recognizing that Peirce’s very elaborate and systematic theory of signs is pretty straightforwardly applicable to memetics. Because this is so recent, I will quote the principal use Aunger makes of Peirce:

So how do memes bridge the distance – the gap of air – between brains [...] How do memes ever manage to escape their home and infect new hosts? Memeticists have typically answered this question by saying that memes leap from brain to brain by inducing their hosts to engage in behaviors that transmit signals to other hosts. Given the proclivity of memeticists to “think epidemiologically,” this is a natural answer to make: Memes, like other parasites, must have a life cycle that includes a phase during which memes are transmitted from host to host. In effect, an infected host must engage in the production of what the nineteenth-century American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce called an “icon.” The icon is the thing that goes between. The meme simply coats itself in a vector – some kind of information-carrying icon, such as a spoken message, an observed motor behavior, a bit of text, an image, or a slab of stone. When a potential host comes into contact with that vector (that is, reads the text or hears the message), the meme leaps out of this vehicle (gets decoded), becoming active again, and infects the person, who becomes a new host. Then the infection phase inside the new host brain starts up. (AUNGER 2002: 233)

Now, I won't say that Aunger has it exactly right, but I will predict that this paragraph has already infected cognitive science with a sufficiently contagious dose of Peirce's mind (his semiotic system) to ultimately infuse it pretty thoroughly with his ideas. Eventually, I suppose, it will be noticed, if it hasn't been already, that pure memetics can be nothing else than a part of Peirce's theory of signs.

Another defining feature of Dennett's philosophy is his aversion to what he calls skyhooks, those imaginary supporting devices that are somehow miraculously available whenever we need some support for otherwise insupportable ideas or theories. Dennett goes to great lengths to develop an alternative but legitimate means for elevating and supporting ideas, his cranes, which are always constructed from materials at hand and are always solidly anchored on firm ground. Dennett uses his idea of cranes to explain how evolution by natural selection can, eventually, result in organisms of very intricate and complex design. This also explains why Dennett regards Darwinism as the Universal Acid that will of ultimately dissolve everything that cannot be supported by some assemblage of cranes.

It is quite interesting how parallel in purpose Peirce's pragmatic maxim was to Dennett's Darwinian Universal Acid. It was quite literally intended to purge metaphysics of the high-flying theories and conceptions that could have no experiential consequences. Peirce might have been delighted, at least in his younger days, to say that pragmatism was intended to purge metaphysics of the doctrines supported only with skyhooks. And probably Peirce would have welcomed Dennett's use of his special cranes. Peirce uses the metaphor of a cantilever bridge to illustrate how through inquiry we cross the great divide between ignorance and knowledge of the universe we inhabit. All kinds of reasoning must be employed to build this bridge, but Peirce says that every plank is first laid by retroduction (or, as he often says, abduction), the only kind of reasoning by which we can hope to add positive content to our store of knowledge. Just like Dennett's cranes, Peirce's cantilever bridges are solidly anchored on firm ground but, like the cranes, the bridges can be ingeniously extended far above and beyond their bases. It is interesting, however, that Peirce sometimes dispensed not only with skyhooks but also with all foundations, and imagined that we are epistemologically, as it were, making our way through a swamp. If we stand too long in one place we will sink, so we have to keep moving. If we do, and if we have good instincts how to move about, we are likely to stay above ground. Putnam calls this the "first really anti-foundationalist metaphor" (BORRADORI: 62).

There is a lot more that is characteristic of Dennett that could fruitfully be compared with views of Peirce – his functionalism, his dismissal of qualia, his views on mental content, and so on – but I believe I have gone far enough to demonstrate that there is sufficient overlap in programmatic and analytical focus to recommend a much deeper and more extended comparison of views. There are critical differences between these two philosophers which I haven't alluded to, and Peirce is deeper and broader in his interests, but there are surprising and revealing resonances.

What is Disturbing about Pragmatism?

I want to begin wrapping things up by going back to what first triggered my interest in comparing Dennett's Darwinism and Peirce's pragmatism, namely, Dennett's remark about the repugnance of Darwinism and my realization that pragmatism had always been found quite disturbing as well.

In his APA Presidential Address, Dennett gave a nice listing of what it is that people hate about Darwinism. If you are composed, as Dennett says you are, of "nothing but a team of a few trillion robotic cells, mindlessly interacting to produce all the large-scale patterns that tradition would attribute to the non-mechanical workings of [your] mind, there seems to be nothing left over of [you]" (DENNETT 2000: 1). "If creativity gets reduced' to 'mere mechanism,'" as Dennett believes it does, "we will be demoted as authors and creators and we will become mere slubs in the fabric of causation" (ibid). "The very idea that all the works of human genius can be understood in the end to be mechanistically generated products of a cascade of generate-and-test algorithms arouses," Dennett says, "deep revulsion in many otherwise quite insightful, open-minded people" (ibid). The problem in short is that Darwinism shows that "Absolute Ignorance is fully qualified to take the place of Absolute Wisdom in *all* the achievements of creative skill" and that, really, literally, it is mindless mechanism all the way down (ibid). There is no God, there is no non-derivative mind, there is no original intention, and there is no causation other than mechanical causation.

I believe Dennett has learned to warmly appreciate this stark view of things, presumably because he believes it represents the truth and he is, after all, a philosopher. But Peirce would object on several grounds. He does not believe that mind can be straight-forwardly derivative nor that mechanical causation can account for the teleological processes that seem evidentially to infuse the universe; but these are concerns I only point out for future consideration. Presumably, pragmatism will not be found repugnant on those counts. But what is it about pragmatism that can be so disturbing?

In the interests of time, I am going to conclude in a provocative manner by merely listing what I believe to be features or consequences of Peirce's pragmatism that many will, and always have, found disturbing. Many, if not most, of these features and consequences apply to the other pragmatisms as well.

First of all there is the naturalism of pragmatism, Peirce's as well as the other forms. Although naturalism may not compel us to reject the idea of non-derivative mind, contra Dennett, it does put humans in a continuum with all other biological organisms and it seems to compel us to accept the finitude of life and even of matter (at least in any given form). Nothing is permanent. We struggle to save endangered species, but we know that one day they will all be gone. The world will disappear.

In our guts, to use Dennett's expression, we know that pragmatism, in the end, denies the existence of God. Even Peirce, who had some relatively strong theological yearnings, at least late in life, had to deny that God exists. He found an argument for the Reality of God, it is true, but if you examine his argument you will discover that the God his pragmatism allows is an unconscious god, a vague god, and one that has to avoid pragmatic examination by avoiding all contact with intelligence. Peirce's god can be an object of experience but not an object of thought. That is the best that pragmatism can offer, and many pragmatists wonder if even with this god Peirce goes too far.

According to Peirce's pragmatic philosophy, we are radically social beings, semiotic systems depending on social conventions and external interpretations for our essential being. Our personalities are not really our own, our minds are less ours than theirs, and our self consciousness is mainly the result of mistakes we have made. Individuality is largely a myth.

In sympathy with Darwinism and its naturalist roots, pragmatists have to admit (or at any rate they can hardly avoid the realization) that there is little reason to believe, and certainly no reason to be confident, that things will get better. Meliorism, in a weak sense may be admissible and, more importantly, desirable, but extreme meliorism, the view that the world *is* getting better, is another myth. The Peircean pragmatist will study the statistics and form a quite different expectation.

Finally, to conclude this impressionistic and no doubt depressing list, I'll point out that the idea that inquiry will end when the truth is reached is only a regulative ideal, by no means what will really happen. Inquiry will end when everyone dies, hopefully not before. When all inquiry ends it will probably be at a time when ignorance and falsity prevail, not truth. Knowledge dies, even after it has been gained, if it is not cared for and nurtured. This is something else that Peirce's semiotic pragmatism teaches us.

So you see, it may be that pragmatism is even more dangerous than Darwinism, and I believe it is indeed the vague apprehension of some of these dangers that has troubled so many people about pragmatism over the years. (I have left out concerns about the cash value of beliefs and the relativity of ideas, but readers are encouraged to add them to the list of dangers.)

Bearing Up

If what the pragmatist says is true, is life worth living? I take it that's the question, in a different form, that Dennett confronts about Darwinism. If the question were asked seriously, I'd answer "yes, of course life is worth living- certainly it is if it always has been and the only thing that makes you question its value now is this list of stark claims." Do you really believe that knowledge that the universe will come to an end will cast a pall over your life now? Does the fact that you know that the flowers you plant will wither and die keep you from tending your garden?

There are other consolations. If you know these truths you know something valuable, even if you don't like what is revealed. More satisfying, though, are esthetic possibilities for enriching whatever time one has. Peirce became convinced of the limitations of pragmatism and, as an old sick man with only six more months to live, wrote that "pragmatism does not bestow a single smile upon beauty, upon moral virtue, or upon abstract truth;—the three things that alone raise Humanity above Animality." So perhaps we should live for beauty, or virtue, or abstract truth. Yes, even abstract truth. We might want to struggle against the odds to bring more reasonableness into the world. We can always hope.

Or we can tend our gardens.²

² Any similarity to the final line of Voltaire's *Candide* is accidental but perhaps unavoidable in the possible world we inhabit.

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