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Understanding and teaching pragmatism: “by their fruits ye shall know”

O ensino e a compreensão do pragmatismo: “os conhecereis pelos seus frutos”

Jaime Nubiola*

jnubiola@unav.es

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Abstract: It is not easy to explain what pragmatism is. Everybody who has had to teach pragmatism to university students has found herself or himself in a difficult situation trying to make a clear exposition. Moreover, it was not easy for Charles S. Peirce himself to explain in a simple manner the pragmatic maxim. In this contribution, I will not go into the technicalities of the pragmatic maxim, but I will share the fruits of my reflection of many years about how pragmatism can be more easily understood and taught. The article is arranged in two parts: the first one is dedicated to the old logical rule of the gospel, “By their fruits ye shall know”, which appears in two texts of Peirce; and the second one to what I call the “logic of the kitchen”, in which I will pay attention also to Peirce’s example of the apple pie. I will add a final consideration about how to teach philosophy today, according to Peirce.

Keywords: Pragmatic Maxim. Pragmatism. Teaching Philosophy.

Resumo: Não é fácil explicar o que é o pragmatismo. Todos aqueles que tiveram de ensinar pragmatismo a estudantes universitários se encontraram em uma situação difícil para apresentar uma exposição clara. Além disso, não foi fácil para o próprio Charles S. Peirce explicar de maneira simples a máxima pragmática. Nesta contribuição, não vou entrar nos aspectos técnicos da máxima pragmática, mas vou compartilhar os frutos da minha reflexão de muitos anos sobre como o pragmatismo pode ser facilmente compreendido e ensinado. O artigo está organizado em duas partes: a primeira é dedicada à velha regra lógica do evangelho, “os conhecereis pelos seus frutos”, que aparece em dois textos de Peirce; e a segunda a qual chamo de “lógica da cozinha”, para a qual também chamo a atenção ao exemplo de Peirce da torta de maçã. Acrescentarei uma consideração final sobre como ensinar filosofia hoje, segundo Peirce.

Palavras-chave: Ensino da filosofia. Máxima pragmática. Pragmatismo.

1 Introduction

It is not easy to explain what pragmatism is. Everybody who has had to teach pragmatism to university students has found herself or himself in a difficult situation trying to make a clear exposition. Moreover, it was not easy for Charles S. Peirce himself to explain in a simple manner the pragmatic maxim. In a recent issue of the *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Jon Alan Schmidt has collected 61 different formulations of Peirce’s maxim in chronological order from 1878 until 1910 (SCHMIDT, 2020). Schmidt finishes his paper by saying: “Much more could certainly be said [...] and I hope that the community of Peirce scholars will join me in exploring them further” (2020, p. 597).



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* Professor of Philosophy at the University of Navarra, Spain.

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In my contribution today I don't want to go into the technicalities of the pragmatic maxim, but I would like to share with you the fruits of my reflection of many years about how pragmatism can be more easily understood and taught. Perhaps my exposition could seem trivial, but let's remember from Peirce that "philosophy is a science based upon everyday experience" (CP 8.112, 1900) and most of the time we do not pay enough attention to what we have right in front of us.

I have arranged my talk into two parts: the first one is dedicated to the old logical rule of the gospel, "By their fruits ye shall know", which appears in two texts of Peirce; and the second one to what I call the "logic of the kitchen", in which I will pay attention also to Peirce's example of the apple pie. I will add a final consideration about how to teach philosophy today, according to Peirce.

2 "Ye may know them by their fruits" (1893) and "By their fruits ye shall know" (1907)

As most of you know, one of the projects of Charles S. Peirce in the last part of his life was to publish a big book on *The art of reasoning or how to reason: a critique of arguments*, identified in the Robin catalogue as the *Grand logic* of 1893, which comprises manuscripts 397-424 (BRENT, 1998, p. 228-230). The main goal of this project was to make money by selling copies of the book. The project did not succeed, but it is a jewel for my exposition because it includes as chapter 16 the "old" article "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", published in 1878 in *Popular Science Monthly* (p. 286-302), whose second section ends with the well-known pragmatic maxim of the third degree of clarity (W 3:266; CP 5.402, 1878). The text was retyped and at the end of page 444, and it says:

It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third degree of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that 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. (W 3:266; CP 5.402, 1878).

The last seven words were handwritten by Peirce, and in the folder of the Peirce Papers in the Houghton Library —also available digitally through the Peirce Digital Archive in Berlin¹—, we find that the two following pages were also handwritten by Peirce as a comment or reflection about what he had just typed, which was originally written fifteen years prior. These two pages were printed as the three paragraphs of footnote 2 by the editors of the *Collected Papers* in CP 5.402. I will quote only the first five lines, which are essential for my exposition. Peirce wrote the following:

Before we undertake to apply this rule, let us reflect a little upon what it implies. It has been said to be a sceptical and materialistic principle. But it is only an application of the sole principle of logic which was recommended by Jesus; "Ye may know them by their fruits," and it is very intimately allied with the ideas of the gospel. (CP 5.402 fn. P2, 1878).

In the rest of those two fascinating pages, Peirce is rebutting the supposed materialistic or skeptical interpretation of the pragmatic maxim, stressing the collective and historical character of human experience. I cannot resist quoting at least the final lines:

Neither must we understand the practical in any low and sordid sense. Individual action is a means and not our end. Individual pleasure is not our end; we are all

¹ The images of the pages of the MS are available at <https://rs.cms.hu-berlin.de/peircearchive/pages/view.php?ref=14802&search=%21collection485+&order_by=resourceid&offset=0&restypes=&starsearch=&archive=&per_page=120&default_sort_direction=DESC&sort=DESC&context=Root&k=&curpos=&go=previous&>.

putting our shoulders to the wheel for an end that none of us can catch more than a glimpse at,—that which the generations are working out. But we can see that the development of embodied ideas is what it will consist of. (CP 5.402 fn. P3, 1878).

According to my research until now, this text from 1893 is the first in which Charles S. Peirce quotes that passage from the gospel of Saint Matthew 7:20: “Ye may know them by their fruits,” as a principle from which the pragmatic maxim is “an application.” Peirce uses the translation from 1869 by George Noyes, professor of Hebrew and other oriental languages at Harvard (NOYES, 1869), and explains that this is the sole principle of logic recommended by Jesus and that it is very intimately allied with the ideas of the gospel.

I would like to mention, by the way, that Charles S. Peirce was very familiar with the gospels. For instance, he had bought copies of the New Testament in very different languages, including Zulu, Dakota, Hawaiian, Jagalu, and Magiar, to compare the grammar of the different languages (SS 95, 1909). Perhaps this may sound strange to contemporary positivistic ears but, in recent years, Peirce’s religious concerns have become increasingly recognized perhaps as philosophically important as his scientific concerns (PARKER, 1998, p. 231 fn. 5; NUBIOLA, 2008; ANDERSON; HAUSMAN, 2012, p. 149ff). In recent times, even Peirce’s regular religious practice in his Milford years has been documented (L 244), including, at least occasionally, week-day Eucharist services, which were “the hallmark of Tractarian or Anglo-Catholic parishes” (JOHNSON, 2006, p. 570 fn. 22).

The second reference I have found in Peirce’s texts to this supposed old logical rule from the gospel corresponds to the traditional reading in the King James version: “By their fruits ye shall know.” It is mentioned in page 9 of the MS 318, 1907, and was included in CP 5.465 under the heading of “The Kernel of Pragmatism”, and in the selection 28 of EP 2:401 entitled “Pragmatism”. The editors write: “In this selection, Peirce comes closer than in any other to fully express his brand of pragmatism and to giving a clearly articulated proof” (EP 2:398). Let’s quote the relevant paragraph:

All pragmatists will further agree that their method of ascertaining the meanings of words and concepts is no other than that experimental method by which all the successful sciences (in which number nobody in his senses would include metaphysics) have reached the degrees of certainty that are severally proper to them today;—this experimental method being itself nothing but a particular application of an older logical rule, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” (EP 2:401).

Again, in this passage Charles S. Peirce not only considers that saying an old logical rule, but he also asserts that the pragmatic method is a particular application of this rule in order to ascertain the meaning of words and concepts. It is an experimental method, and it is the method by which, through science, we reach certainty.

For the audience not familiar with the gospel, perhaps it might be useful to quote the whole passage that illuminates the sense of the rule:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. (MATTHEW, 7:16-20).

Like most things in the gospels, this text reflects the common wisdom of the old Jewish society, but in this case it also reflects our most common experience: we identify plants mainly by their fruits; we do not look for grapes from thorn bushes, but from grapevines; we have no privileged access to what kind

of plant is a vegetal in front of us; we do not have a direct access to the essence of the plant; on the contrary, from the fruits—allied with the shape of the leaves, the smell and so on—we infer what plant it is. There is no privileged knowledge of the essence as the rationalist tradition assumed, but it is an inferential process. That process is, of course, susceptible to failure; that is, it is fallible. But we are able to acknowledge our failures and to reach the truth usually in a few steps.

This is the heart of pragmatism and of the pragmatic maxim. In sum, what I am suggesting here is that the easiest way to explain with clarity the strength and power of the pragmatic maxim is invoking—as Peirce did in these two passages—that old rule of the gospel: “Ye shall know them by their fruits.”

2 The logic of the kitchen

In my lectures, I like to illustrate the presentation of the pragmatic maxim with what I call “the logic of the kitchen,” in part inspired by Peirce’s use of the example of the apple pie, but also by Susan Haack’s insistence that our logic in daily matters is not very alien to the highest or deepest scientific reflection: there is a clear continuity between the more sophisticated reasonings in quantum physics and the ordinary reflection of menial tasks. Haack likes to stress, following Peirce, that science is best understood not as a body of knowledge, but as a kind of inquiry. Let’s quote from Haack’s *Evidence matters: science, proof, and truth in the law* (2014):

Inquiry is something just about everyone engages in just about every day, when they want to know the source of a bad smell, the cause of a delayed light, or whatever; and it is the professional occupation of scientists, historians, detectives, investigative journalists, of legal and literary scholars, and of philosophers, among others. Unlike such other human activities as cooking dinner, composing a symphony, dancing, debating, or pleading a case before the Supreme Court, inquiry is an attempt to discover the truth of some question or questions. (HAACK, 2014, p. 29).

There are several important differences between trying to discover the truth of a question and cooking dinner, but both are human activities determined by their purpose and their end, by thirdness. In some sense, teaching philosophy is an intermediate activity between theory and practice.

In order to highlight what it is to be a pragmatist; I would like to explain what I do in my classes. Sometimes, I try to identify some good cook in the audience, and I invite him or her to explain to the rest of the class how he or she prepares some special cake following the recipe learnt from her grandmother. The student is happy to become the main actor of the class and makes an effort to explain, briefly, the whole process. “And what do you do before bringing the cake to the table?”, I ask the cook. The student usually doubts his or her answer but, finally, perhaps with some of my help, they say that they try a bit of the cake to check if everything is okay, since it might have had a problem with the fire, the water, the flour, or the baking time. I answer them by saying “You are not only a good cook, but you are also a good pragmatist. You do not rely only on the a priori knowledge of faithfully applying your grandmother’s recipe, but you also check with your senses if the result of the cake is right, so you can bring it to the table. You know the quality of your cake by its fruits in your senses: its flavor in your mouth, its smell in your nose, its aspect through your eyes, etc.” This is another application of the rule of the gospel “By their fruits ye shall know,” which is also entrenched in the old saying “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

Let’s revise this again. We do not have direct access to the essence of the cake, even if we have applied our grandmother’s recipe. Although we have done a similar process several times before and we have experienced that everything worked well the previous times and the cake was good, we pragmatists always check the result before serving. We do not trust only in the authority of the previous experience, nor in the a priori method of the grandmother’s recipe, but we fully apply the “scientific method” in

order to serve our visitors a tasty cake.² The essential point is, again, to acknowledge that we have no direct access to the real quality of the cake without tasting it. This might be considered a corollary of Peirce's denial of Cartesian intuition: "We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions" (W 2:213, CP 5.265, 1868). This point is central for us to understand what pragmatism is.

In a fragment about "Thirdness" from 1895, Peirce offers the example of the preparation of an apple pie to introduce the idea of generality. This manuscript was included in the first volume of the *Collected Papers* as an explanation of the third category (CP 1.338-342). I want to dedicate attention to it since it is also a good illustration of what I have called the "logic of the kitchen"; that is, of the need to reflect upon our everyday practices. The paragraph starts in this way:

Let us examine the idea of generality. Every cook has in her recipe-book a collection of rules, which she is accustomed to follow. An apple pie is desired. Now, observe that we seldom, probably never, desire a single individual thing. What we want is something which shall produce a certain pleasure of a certain kind. [...] An apple pie, then, is desired—a good apple pie, made of fresh apples, with a crust moderately light and somewhat short, neither too sweet nor too sour, etc. But it is not any particular apple pie; for it is to be made for the occasion; and the only particularity about it is that it is to be made and eaten today. (CP 1.341).

And then the illustration continues with the following:

For that, apples are wanted; and remembering that there is a barrel of apples in the cellar, the cook goes to the cellar and takes the apples that are uppermost and handiest. That is an example of following a general rule. She is directed to take apples. Many times she has seen things which were called apples, and has noticed their common quality. She knows how to find such things now; and as long as they are sound and fine, any apples will do. What she desires is something of a given quality; what she has to take is this or that particular apple. [...] what is desired is not a mere unattached quality. [...] She has no particular apple pie she particularly prefers to serve; but she does desire and intend to serve an apple pie to a particular person. [...] Throughout her whole proceedings she pursues an idea or dream without any particular thisness or thatness—or, as we say, haecceity—to it, but this dream she wishes to realize in connection with an object of experience, which as such, does possess haecceity; and since she has to act, and action only relates to this and that, she has to be perpetually making random selections, that is, taking whatever comes handiest.

Peirce's illustration of thirdness, of generality, is suggestive, and highlights the point that I also want to stress on reflection upon everyday experience. Peirce explicitly spells out the moral of the story (POTTER, 1967, p. 88): "The dream [of the cook] itself has no prominent thirdness; it is, on the contrary, utterly irresponsible; it is whatever it pleases. The object of experience as a reality is a second. But the desire in seeking to attach the one to the other is a third, or medium" (CP 1.342).

3 Final consideration: How to teach philosophy according to Peirce³

As most of you know, during five years, from the fall of 1879 until December 1884, Charles S. Peirce worked as a part-time lecturer in logic in the recently created Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore,

² This example can be understood also as an illustration of the different methods of belief fixation (CP 5.358-386; W 3:242-257, 1877).

³ I've developed this issue in Nubiola (2016). In the year 2008, there was a publication in *Transactions*, of an interesting symposium of fourteen philosophers sharing their experience teaching Peirce to undergraduates in a variety of settings (CAMPBELL; DE WAAL; HART, 2008).

where graduate studies involving research were developed for the first time in the United States. We have reliable information of Peirce's activity as a teacher (DAVIS, 1914; FISCH; COPE, 1952). He was an inspiring teacher for committed and advanced graduate students, but perhaps unintelligible to others, as Paul Weiss summarizes in his early biography of Peirce:

Too advanced perhaps for the ordinary student, he was a vital formative factor in the lives of the more progressive ones, who remembered him later with affection and reverence. He treated them as intellectual equals and impressed them as having a profound knowledge of his subject. (WEISS, 1934, p. 402).

For instance, Christine Ladd-Franklin—Peirce's student at Johns Hopkins—remarked that Peirce as a teacher did not attract by “anything that could be called an inspiring personality,” but rather “by creating the impression that we had before us a profound, original, dispassionate and impassioned seeker of truth” (1916, p. 716-717). Joseph Jastrow, another student of Peirce, highlighted that “a deep conviction of *the significance of the problems presented* and a *mastery of the intellectual processes* were his sole and adequate pedagogical equipment” (1916, p. 723; *my emphasis*).

I love this quotation. It seems to me that most of the difficulties of teaching philosophy today arise from the frequent incapability of the teachers to show the *significance* of the problems of life to the audience. Philosophy is not—and cannot be—only an academic exercise, but it is an instrument for the progressive critical and rational reconstruction of everyday living. For this reason, philosophy should start from real conversations and not from abstract ideas that are alien to the life and thought of the students and the teacher. Let's quote Charles S. Peirce again:

Remembering, then, that philosophy is a science based upon everyday experience, we must not fall into the absurdity of setting down as a datum and starting-point of philosophy any abstract and simple idea, as Hegel did when he began his logic with pure Being; [...] We must not begin by talking of pure ideas,—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation,—but must begin with men and their conversation. (CP 8.112, 1900).

In a well-known Socratic tradition, philosophy should start with our conversations and the different real opinions about human problems. We can always remember the beautiful and significant subtitle of William James' *Pragmatism*: “A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking.” Through our teachings, our students should discover that they are pragmatists without them knowing it. In this sense, it seems to me that the best way to explain pragmatism is invoking the rule of the gospel, “By their fruits ye shall know,” and using examples from the real life of the students, as I have illustrated with what I have called the logic of the kitchen.

But also, Charles S. Peirce taught us to pay attention to the experience of philosophy, and he stressed “that it is extremely difficult to bring our attention to elements of experience which are continually present. For we have nothing in experience with which to contrast them; and without contrast, they cannot excite our attention” (CP 1.134, 1894). Or, as he explained in *The Law of Mind*: the “... facts that stand before our face and eyes and stare us in the face are far from being, in all cases, the ones most easily discerned. That has been remarked from time immemorial” (CP 6.162, 1891).

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List of Abbreviations⁴

The works of Charles S. Peirce are cited as follows:

Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: volume (v) and paragraph (p) (CP v:p).

The Essential Peirce: volume (v), page (p) (EP v:p).

The Charles S. Peirce Papers: roll (r), page (p) (MS r:p).

Semiotic and Significs: page (p) (SS p).

Writings of Charles S. Peirce: volume (v), page (p) (W v:p).

⁴ Editor's Note: This list of abbreviations follows the rules described at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Sanders_Peirce_bibliography. Accessed on: 01 Dec. 2021.