

The Role Of Pragmatic Method In Western Philosophical Thoughts

Dr. R. Rajalakshmi

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy,
Religion & Culture, Poompuhar College (Autonomous),
Melaiyur, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract: Pragmatism is a Philosophical movement or system having various forms, but generally stressing practical consequences as constituting the essential criterion in determining meaning truth or value. The word Pragmatism as a piece of technical terminology in philosophy refers to a specific set of associated philosophical views originating in the late 19th century. Pragmatism as a Philosophical movement began in the United States in the 1870s; C.S. Peirce is given credit for its development along with later 20th century contributors, William James and John Dewey.

Pragmatic Method implies attitude of orientation, it is looking away from first principles and towards fruits, consequences and facts. According to William James "Pragmatic has no dogmas, no doctrines save its method. No Particular results then but only an attitude or orientation is what the pragmatism method means" As an attitude towards life pragmatism is too tole-rant. It Considers a belief true which works successfully, false when it false. Success and satisfaction are the validity of a belief. Being realistic, Pragmatism recognizes that many of our ideas are true simply because they work successfully.

Pragmatism emphasizes the need of accepting personal considerations in the matters of belief and knowledge. Thinking vital activity and it must be utilized for solving day-to-day problems of life. Therefore, it cannot take place in isolation from actual facts. We should think in order to live, in order to make. Life secure and happy. For this reason pragmatism reviews the aim and function of Philosophy. Instead of wasting time in picturing supernatural reality, Philosophy should devote itself to dealing with existing and concrete problems of life. All our theories, ideas and notions are unless they help in modification of human behavior. Man is a complex constitution of instincts, feelings and emotions, and his life consists of success and failures, risks and uncertainties. He is under constant pressures from different directions. All his knowledge and actions must serve the ends of life. Philosophy must be used for life, here and now.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatism is opposed to all forms of idealism and absolutism. Pragmatism as a philosophical school is against the purely logical and abstract bias of philosophy; its own approach is essentially practical. Philosophy according to pragmatism, should be vitally related to human life and existence. Therefore this essay deals about the role of pragmatic method in western philosophical thoughts.

II. PRAGMATISM

Pragma means useful (or) purposeful. Pragmatism is a method of inquiry and a theory of meaning and truth, derived from the natural sciences and applicable to philosophy. The term pragmatism was used by the American Scientist and logician Charles pierce (1839-1914) for the first time on the basis of suggestion he found in Kant's Metaphysics of morals. Thus he was led to accept pragmatic conclusion.

The term pragmatism in its literal sense, it implies that each person should adopt beliefs which suit him in his practical life without any consideration of agreement with other people³. Truth is relative to person and circumstances.

The concept of absolute truth and absolute reality is, therefore rejected by the Pragmatists.

Everything including knowledge and truth is to be determined by human consideration and utility. Rejecting the logic of traditional philosophy as barren intellectual exercise, Pragmatism holds that our thought process must not be divorced from practical life. It is practical utility that determines the truth of belief.

Expressing the spirit of pragmatism William James said that a belief is true, So long as to believe it is profitable in our lives. Making human experience the basis of truth, pragmatists are humanists in the approach. Pragmatists rejected absolutism and brought Philosophy from its transcendentalism to the empirical level of the common man.

Pragmatism is a Philosophical movement or system having various forms, but generally stressing practical consequences as constituting the essential criterion in determining meaning truth or value. The word Pragmatism as a piece of technical terminology in philosophy refers to a specific set of associated philosophical views originating in the late 19th century. Pragmatism as a Philosophical movement began in the United States in the 1870s; C.S. Peirce is given credit for its development along with later 20th century contributors, William James and John Dewey.

Pragmatism rejects the idea that the function of thought is to describe, represent or mirror reality. Instead, Pragmatists consider thought an instrument or tool for prediction problem solving and action. Pragmatists contend that most Philosophical topics – such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science – are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes. The Philosophy of Pragmatism emphasizes the Practical application of ideas by acting on them to actually test them in human experiences.

III. PRAGMATISTS

A. C.S. PEIRCE (1839 – 1914)

C.S. Peirce was born in 1839 in Cambridge, the son of a Harvard Professor. Peirce had an excellent knowledge of the history of Philosophy. He was especially influenced by the scholastic thinkers. Peirce was an idealist, and thus he refused to accept a materialistic concept of nature. C.S. Peirce adopted the term Pragmatism from Immanuel Kant, who had made a distinction between the Pragmatic and the Practical. Peirce interpreted Pragmatism as a method whereby ideas can be made clear, not a utilitarian technique. When the philosophy of James became very popular, Peirce made it clear that his own view did not follow James's and he called his theory Pragmatism.



Figure 1: C.S. Peirce

B. WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910)

William James who was greatly influenced by Peirce was the descendant of a notable family. He defined his Philosophical method in Pragmatism (1907) James made it clear that Pragmatism would uproot many of the ideals of the professional philosophers. Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in

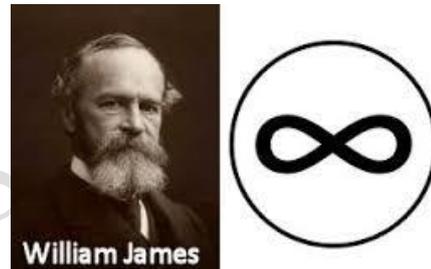


Figure 2: William James

philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. Pragmatism is uncomfortable away from facts. Rationalism is comfortable only in the presence of abstractions.

C. JOHN DEWEY (1859-1952)

In a Philosophy he called instrumentalism John Dewey attempted to combine both Peirce and James Philosophies of Pragmatism. It was thus both about Logical concepts as well as ethical analysis. Instrumentalism describes Dewey's ideas the conditions under which reasoning and inquiry occurs.

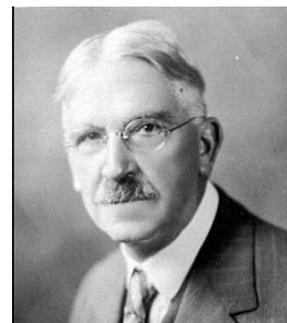


Figure 3: John Dewey

If ideas, meaning, conceptions, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganization, of the given environment, to a removal of some specific trouble and

perplexity, then the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work.

D. FERDINAND C. S. SCHILLER (1864-1937)

In his Humanism, F.C.S. Schiller formulated a relativistic view of knowledge. Later, he expressed a deliberate preference for the Philosophy of Protagoras over that of Plato. The Presuppositions of human knowledge he regarded as practical postulates, rather than absolute axioms. Schiller acknowledged that man is doer rather than a knower: His practical interests come first. Moral and religious concerns play a



Figure 4: F.C.S.Schiller

fundamental part in what man believes is true, as knowledge. All that man ever succeeds in reaching is opinion, nothing is ever final. In addition, Schiller declared formal logic to be a social problem rather than a guide to life.⁸

IV. PRAGMATIC METHOD

Pragmatic Method implies attitude of orientation, it is looking away from first principles and towards fruits, consequences and facts. According to William James "Pragmatic has no dogmas, no doctrines save its method. No

Particular results then but only an attitude or orientation is what the pragmatism method means" As an attitude towards life pragmatism is too tolerant. It considers a belief true which works successfully, false when it false. Success and satisfaction are the validity of a belief. Being realistic, Pragmatism recognizes that many of our ideas are true simply because they work Successfully.

Pragmatism emphasizes the need of accepting personal considerations in the matters of belief and knowledge .Thinking vital activity and it must be utilized for solving day-to-day problems of life. Therefore, it cannot take place in isolation from actual facts. We should think in order to live, in order to make. Life secure and happy. For this reason pragmatism reviews the aim and function of Philosophy. Instead of wasting time in picturing supernatural reality, Philosophy should devote itself to dealing with existing and concrete problems of life. All our theories, ideas and notions are unless they help in modification of human behavior. Man is a complex constitution of instincts, feelings and emotions, and his life consists of success and failures, risks and uncertainties. He is under constant pressures from different directions. All his knowledge and actions must serve the ends of life. Philosophy must be used for life, here and now.

V. TYPES OF PRAGMATISTS

- ✓ Opposed to rationalism
- ✓ Opposed to agnosticism.

Those who are opposed to rationalism, rejected the concept of eternal truth, a priori knowledge truth is created by human operations with the material furnished by human experiences. It is modifiable by experiences. Pragmatism opposed to agnosticism ridicule, the attitude of helplessness. We should have positive attitude towards life.

VI. IMPORTANT FEATURES OF PRAGMATISM

- ✓ The most important feature of pragmatism is that it is not interested in traditional philosophy. It is futile to discuss ultimate questions and the view of reality having no relevance to our concrete problems.
- ✓ Pragmatism is inspired by actual human experiences. Therefore, the pragmatists derive their doctrines from concrete realities of life, directly experienced. They do not start with presuppositions, eternal truth and a priori knowledge. The notions of reality should be open to verification and modification with the help of experiences. Truth is a belief evolved through the test of individuals and social experiences. A belief isolated from real conditions of life and not tested and verified in actual experiences has to be rejected. Verifiability through experiences is the real test of truth.
- ✓ Pragmatism is opposed to absolutism, absolute truth, absolute good, absolute reality. Everything is relative to time, needs and utility. There is a wide range of interests which govern our life. Workability and usefulness are to determine the relevance of a belief. Learning from experiences we should be able to modify our conduct for better adjustment. American pragmatists emphasize that a belief should help us in achieving success and in the formation of useful habits.
- ✓ Pragmatism is a way of looking at life and its problems. It is an expression of dissatisfaction with any view which implies denial of the reality of change, human freedom, individuality. It is a humanistic point of view and considers man as the Centre of all knowledge. Pragmatism is a forward looking philosophy of life and gives hope of a better future is human considerations govern our attitude and beliefs.
- ✓ According to William James Pragmatic method is primarily a method of setting metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be indeterminable try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. James as a pragmatist emphasized practicability, workability, usefulness in actual human experiences as the sole standard of reality and truth.
- ✓ Pragmatism becomes instrumentalism in the ideas of John Dewey and assumes a new dimension. As a pragmatist, Dewey also expresses his strong opposition to absolutist tendency in Philosophy. Dewey advocated the use of scientific method in all fields of human experiences as effective means of solving social, Political and Economic problems. Dewey also protested against the divorce of

thought and action, theory and practice. Knowledge which is based on practical experiences can not be treated in isolation. Knowledge is a proper role in human life as it helps in working out conditions in which individual can create values of decent living. Dewey said that thought has to be as an instrument of action. It has to be used for promoting the interests of life. Dewey wanted to apply the method of science to every possible field of inquiry. The method of intelligence is the pragmatic or instrumentalist method. It is possible to the test meaning and worth of ideas, customs institutions in the light of there consequences through the scientific method. The social consequences of this approach leads us to the conception of a new society free from ignorance, insecurity, oppression and disorder. Dewey said it should be considered as theory of practice. Thus it is clear that John Dewey laid stress on the practicability and usefulness of ideas and beliefs.

- ✓ Instrumentalism – The term as applied by Dewey the function of ideas as instruments of living, not as a goal of living.
- ✓ The humanistic aspect of pragmatic philosophy finds expression in the writings of British philosopher F.C.S. Schiller. Whatever is true must serve human interest and purpose since man is the measure of all things. Philosophy according to Schiller, Should not be a purely Speculative affair but must serve a practical purpose. According to Schiller, truth is human, conditioned by psychological interests and human efforts. Truth is not given readymade but is created by man. Therefore all attempts to ignore the human factor in an effort to construct view of knowledge and values is found to be wrong.

According to Schiller, Philosophy is not a speculative affair, but a practical attitude based on experience. He won the credit of introducing humanism as an explicit philosophy. Reality according to him lies in the belief in personal ego and the plurality of individuals. Influenced by the ideas of James. Schiller agreed with him in stressing that truth must be useful in life must be serviceable. He also emphasized that truth is man – made, every truth must be human truth. Hence, the concept of eternally valid and timeless truth is rejected.

VII. CONCLUSION

Pragmatism is a late 19th century and early 20th century school of philosophy which considers practical consequences or real effects to be vital components of both meaning and truth. At its simplest something is true only insofar as it works. However, Pragmatism is not a single Philosophy and is more a style or way of doing Philosophy. Pragmatism is not a systematic method. It is more a method, an expression of definite attitude, a way of looking at things and life. Pragmatism gives more importance to action over thinking and speculation. It represents a progressive outlook which views the universe as growing and developing. All pragmatists expresses a concern for individuals and social good and stressed on usefulness, Practicability and workability of any theory or doctrine as the criterion for their acceptance. Therefore they were nothing but realists. Many of our difficulties and sufferings are due to our unrealistic and impractical approach in life. Hence, Pragmatism can be considered as the most suitable point of view and method for the man of today.

REFERENCES

- [1] Frank Thilly (1978) A History of Philosophy, P-634
- [2] Ibid.,P-634
- [3] Bali, D.R.(1992) Introduction to Philosophy, P-44
- [4] Ibid., P-44
- [5] Frederick Mayer (1976) A History of Modern Philosophy,P-528
- [6] Ibid., P-530
- [7] Ibid., P-540
- [8] Albert E.Avey (1958) Handbook in the History of Philosophy, P-244
- [9] Bali, D.R.(1992) Op.Cit., P-45
- [10] Ramnath Sharma (2004) Great Philosophers of the World, P-300
- [11] Bali, D.R. (1992) Op.Cit., P-45
- [12] Ibid.,P-46