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ARTICLE

A New Neo-Pragmatism: From James and Dewey to Foucault
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ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault's thought not only converges with a certain type of pragmatism; it can deepen our understanding of pragmatism. There is an ambivalence in pragmatist thought between an approach that privileges the question of: "What works?" and "How does it work?" The former misses the political idea that some practices don't just work, but work for one purpose or another. Foucault's pragmatism does not focus on what works, but instead utilizes the concept of practices as a unit of analysis, and then asks how they work. This reintroduces a political element that sometimes goes missing in pragmatist thought.

Keywords: Politics, holism, practices, power.

Until the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pragmatism was the neglected stepchild of contemporary philosophy. If Rorty had done nothing else—and I am among those who believe he did much else—recalling us to the contributions of philosophers like James and Dewey would be service enough to philosophy. Perhaps because many of their writings were accessible to people who were not immersed in academic philosophy, these thinkers were considered to be of a lesser caliber than others whose texts were more obscure.

I would like to argue here that Michel Foucault, of all people, is a sort of pragmatist. He is not a classical pragmatist, although in some ways his methodology is closer to Dewey's than one might think. He is, indeed, in some ways closer to a thinker like Dewey than to some contemporary neo-pragmatists, for example Rorty himself. Above all, however, thinking about Foucault in terms of pragmatism not only enlightens us on Foucault's work. More importantly, it offers us a chance to complicate pragmatism in a fruitful way. In short, it shifts the pragmatist question from one of "What works?" to one of "How does it work?" This productive methodological shift at once challenges pragmatism's areas of blindness and opens it to more subtle political perspectives.

In his 1906-7 lectures on pragmatism, William James defined pragmatism as "first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth."[1] As a method, pragmatism asks, "What difference would it make practically to anyone if this notion rather than that

[1] William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 26.

notion were true? If no practical alternative can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right."[2] As a theory of truth, pragmatism posits that "*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot*… The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea."[3]

In order to grasp what James means by pragmatism as a method, we must distinguish it from Ayer's verificationism. The two may sound similar at first glance. Recall that for Ayer, the meaning of a claim is its method of verification. "The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false."[4] For Ayer, if we want to understand what a sentence means, we need to know what would make it true or false. This "making true or false" is an empirical making. So, for instance, the meaning of "There are U.S. soldiers in Iraq" is given by what would count as evidence of their being U.S. soldiers in Iraq.[5]

James' view is different. Although, like Ayer, James is concerned with practical consequences, he does not model those consequences solely on empirical research. The consequences he is interested in are bound to the shape of our lives. The "practical difference" he is seeking is not solely a scientific one. It is a matter of what makes a difference in how we navigate our lives. This is exemplified in James' brief discussion of free will. After criticizing the positing of free will as reducible to a matter of punishment and reward, James tells his audience that "Free-will pragmatically means novelties in the world, the right to expect that in its deepest elements as well as in its surface phenomena, the future may not identically repeat and imitate the past… It holds up improvement as at least possible; whereas determinism assures us that our whole notion of possibility is born of human ignorance, and that necessity and impossibility between them rule the destinies of the world."[6] To believe in free will is to believe in the promise of the world, a promise that allows one to engage oneself with its gears in the hope that one might make a difference in its operation. As James also says, free will is a doctrine of "promise," promise that one's life might make a difference in how things are or become in the world one inhabits.

Compare this doctrine with Ayer's claim that "we must ask how it is that I come to make my choice. Either it is an accident that I choose to act as I do or it is not. If it is an accident, then it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise; and if it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise, it is surely irrational to hold me morally responsible for choosing as I did. If it is not an accident that I choose to do one thing rather

[2] James, 18.
[3] James, 77. Italics in original.
[4] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946), 35.
[5] Notoriously, Ayer's verificationism was hoist on its own petard, as the verificationist claim could not be verified by the method it posits. That, however, is a bit wide of our story here.
[6] James, 46.

than another, then presumably there is some causal explanation of my choice: and in that case we are led back to determinism."[7] For him, the debate between free will theorists and determinists comes down to one of moral responsibility, which in turn comes down to the question of causal explanation. For James, by contrast, the difference a claim is supposed to make is not epistemic one, but rather, in the broad sense, an existential one. Dewey strikes a similar note when he writes that, "An empirical finding is refuted not by a denial that one finds things to be thus and so, but by giving directions for a course of experience that results in finding its opposite to be the case. To convince of error as well as to lead to truth is to assist another to see and find something which he hitherto has failed to find and recognize."[8]

The pragmatist view of truth, the second element of pragmatism James isolates, is in keeping with its methodological approach. Truth, for James, is a becoming. It is not a correspondence between a pre-existing world and a claim about it. The idea of correspondence itself presupposes a distinction between subject and object that Dewey roundly criticizes in *Experience and Nature*. Rather, a truth is to be conceived as a belief that helps us navigate the world more efficiently to our purposes. Rorty writes, "James' point [when defining truth as 'what is good in the way of belief'] was that there *is* nothing deeper to be said: truth is not the sort of thing which *has* an essence."[9] We discover truths when we recognize that certain beliefs are better to have than others, because they fit better with our attempt to live.

This should not be mistaken for a coherence theory of truth. For coherence theories, what makes a claim true is its fit with other claims. Such an approach, however, cleaves experience from the epistemic realm, pretending that the claims we make form an arena in which truth becomes internally referential. That is not the pragmatist point. It would, in fact, betray James' (and Rorty's) recognition by positing an essence of truth. Rather, we might say that there is nothing in particular to be said about truth, but instead only about particular truths. As Dewey puts the point, "Truth is a collection of truths; and these constituent truths are in the keeping of the best available methods of inquiry and testing as to matters-of-fact; methods which are, when collected under a single name, science. As to truth, then, philosophy has no pre-eminent status; it is a recipient, not a donor."[10]

One might quibble with the details of this type of account of truth. For instance, it might be difficult for one to defend an account of a claim such as "It's true," strictly in terms of "It's a claim that will help one navigate the world better." As other neo-pragmatists have recognized, one needs to have a slightly altered, but nevertheless deflationary, view of truth in order to square the pragmatist account with the specific technicalities of how terms like "true" function in language.[11] However, the point remains that for Brandom and the neo-pragmatists, there is nothing philosophically interesting about truth. What is interesting lies in the beliefs themselves, in their inferential structure and their intertwining with our living.

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[7] A. J. Ayer, "Freedom and Necessity," in *Philosophical Essay* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 275.

[8] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 31.

[9] Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 162.

[10] Dewey, 410.

[11] See, for example, Brandom's "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 12, (1988), 75-93.

It is in this intertwining of truth, inferential structure, and living we find the relation of Foucault to pragmatism. There is a deep bond, but also a certain critique that is at play here. Let us start with the bond, since it will lead us to the critique. Foucault writes that, "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint."[12] As with the pragmatist approach to truth, one might quibble with Foucault's wording here. I have argued elsewhere that what Foucault is getting at is not truth per se but instead beliefs that are justified within a particular political and epistemic structure.[13]

Leaving that issue aside, we can begin to see that for both Foucault and the pragmatists what we hold to be true is inseparable from how we go about living. For both, the relation of our beliefs to truth (or at least what is held to be true) may be described in this way. In the course of our living, we act on the basis of beliefs we possess. Those beliefs are, to a greater or lesser degree, tested by that living. Some beliefs are constantly exposed to the possibility of revision, others less so. For instance, the belief that sunrise and sunset occur at approximately similar times on approximately similar days is under constant exposure to revision; not so much the belief that electrons are constituted by quarks.

In our actions, we are not required to consciously hold the belief or beliefs that ground them. These beliefs may instead be implied. For instance, when I brush my teeth, I do not think to myself, "The toothbrush is not made of lead," although if asked whether I believe that is the case I would affirm it. Putting the point otherwise, what I believe and how I act are of a piece. In many cases, just as we could read off how one is likely to act by knowing what one believes, one might go the other way around and read off what one believes by how one acts.

From this, we can see that belief and action are deeply entwined. We can go a step further and see that our belief/action entwinement is itself entwined with the world. This latter step is founded on pragmatism's idea that the subject/object distinction is a philosophical illusion. "When objects are isolated from the experience through which they are reached and in which they function," Dewey writes, "experience itself becomes reduced to the mere process of experiencing, and experiencing is therefore treated as if it were also complete in itself. We get the absurdity of an experiencing which experiences only itself, states and process of consciousness, instead of the things of nature."[14] To the nexus formed by belief and action, then, we must add the nexus formed by actor and world. There is a holism at work here, one that is common to the pragmatists and Foucault, as well as thinkers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

This holism implies that what happens in one element of what Dewey would call "experience" can affect other elements. A change in the world can affect how one acts and/or what one believes. A change in action can change the world and/or change what one believes. And a change in belief can affect one's action and/or the world. None of these elements is immune to any other one. However, one might ask about the ways in which this interaction, this

[12] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

[13] See *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1993), esp. Chaps. 5 and 6.

[14] Dewey, 11.

holism, occurs. Is there anything we can say about the operation of Dewey's experience that would enlighten us as to its character?

I believe there is. The primary vehicle for this holism is what might be called, in keeping with pragmatist tradition, practices or social practices. I have defined practices elsewhere as, "a regularity (or regularities) of behavior, usually goal-directed, that is socially normatively governed."[15] Roughly, the idea is that to be involved in a practice is to act in a recognizable and often coordinated way for particular ends by means of norms that are themselves recognizable, at least to others who are familiar with the practice. On this account, baseball is a practice, as is child-rearing, teaching, psychotherapy, and almost all of what we spend our waking hours doing. To put the point another way, the nexus formed by the actor and the world, that nexus through which beliefs and actions flow through, is largely structured by the practices in which that actor participates. Actor/world engagement is not an atomistic affair, one in which actions have no coordination and beliefs arise occasion by occasion. Rather, the engagement is patterned by the social practices in and through which actors express and often define themselves.

The idea of a practice is not foreign to pragmatism. In fact, it seems implied in much of the pragmatist literature; although I don't know of anywhere it receives explicit treatment. The sciences Dewey refers to in the citation above as collecting truths, as well as philosophy, are examples of appeals to practices as coherent, structured forms of behavior. Foucault's genealogy is in fact precisely a genealogy of practices. When he traces the emergence of particular relations of power, especially in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, he is in fact tracing the historical convergence of particular practices. And although this fact is not generally recognized, it was recognized by Foucault himself. In a roundtable on *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault once said, "In this work on the prisons, as in others, the target, the point of analytic attack, was not 'institutions,' nor 'theories' or 'ideologies,' but 'practices'…it is a question of analyzing a 'regime of practices'—practices considered as the place of intertwining of what is said and what is done, of rules that are imposed and of reasons that are given, projects and evidence."[16]

It is at this juncture, this point of closest contact between pragmatism and Foucault that we can begin to see what separates the two, and what Foucault has to offer pragmatism in terms of critical political depth. As we saw above, James' concern with truth is a concern with what we might call the becoming-successful of particular claims or beliefs. (The distinction between claims and beliefs does not matter for the stakes of this discussion.) This is a common pragmatist theme. Truth and consequently the goodness of belief are defined in terms of what works, of what allows one to navigate the world more successfully than before. That navigation can be more or less epistemically inflected. Science, for instance, is a more epistemically oriented practice, whereas baseball is not. As a result, the truths that happen in science will seem more divorced from everyday life, more concerned with "pure" knowledge, than the truths that happen in baseball; but both, in their ways, are happenings of truth that allow

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[15] Todd May, *Our Practices, Our Selves, Or What it Means to be Human* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2001), 8.

[16] Michel Foucault, et. al., *L'impossible prison* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 42. (my translation)

one to navigate the world through one's practices (scientific investigation, baseball) more successfully.

It is precisely at this point that Foucault's critique takes place. He does not deny any of what we have said so far. For Foucault, as for James, truth happens to an idea. Rather, his intervention consists in asking about the political character of practices, especially in their particular historical dimension. Once this political character is recognized, the idea of successful navigation of the world will seem more complicated. To anticipate, the questions that his investigations allow us to ask, concern the character of successful world engagement.

At this point I would like to take several familiar ideas from Foucault's work and arrange them in such a way as to clarify the relation between power and practices. As all Foucault scholars know, among Foucault's ideas about power, at least three are central: that power appears "at the capillaries," that power is productive and not simply repressive, and that much power is intimately linked with knowledge. My claim is that it is the concept of practices that brings these three ideas together. To see how, let's take as an example a practice that appears often in Foucault's work: psychotherapy. (For the sake of simplicity, we can leave aside the question of whether different types of psychotherapy constitute distinct social practices.)

First, psychotherapy operates at the capillaries. At the heart there are like structures like the state or collections of practices like the economy. In contrast, a particular practice like psychotherapy, while its effects (psychological, economic, and otherwise) might flow to the heart, remain at the capillary level.

Psychotherapy requires and contributes a certain type of knowledge; knowledge of what people—and in particular their personalities—are like. The various incarnations of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, whose diagnoses are required by insurance companies if patients are to be reimbursed for therapy, trace different understandings of personality disorder. In earlier versions of the DSM, for instance, homosexuality was a disorder. Now, by grace of the profession, it is not. Those who develop the DSM have a story to tell about this history. It is a familiar story, which concerns the progress of scientific knowledge. As we learn more about what the human mind is like, we become more accurate in recognizing and diagnosing particular psychological disorders. Readers of Foucault, however, will immediately recognize the kind of progressive history his work has done so much to subvert. In particular, his work has done much to subvert the story of progress in the history of psychotherapy. One need only recall the pages in *Discipline and Punish* concerning the role of the "psy" sciences in individualizing criminals and making their crimes expressions of their personalities or the discussion of the figures of the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, and the perverse adult in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in order to recognize this. Without recounting those familiar stories in detail, we can conclude that, for Foucault, the knowledge bound up with the practice of psychotherapy is a knowledge that is intimately linked to power.

From there, it is only a short step to the conception of power as productive. The diagnoses posited by psychotherapeutic practice and its allied practices of academic psychology are as much produced as discovered. In fact, there is no clear line that can be drawn between the production and the discovery of the various figures of the DSM: the homosexual, the

schizophrenic, the borderline personality, etc. This is because those who are submitted to psychotherapy, inasmuch as such therapy is successful, begin to understand themselves in the terms in which they are seen. As they do so, they act in accordance with their diagnoses and the particular cures to those diagnoses. (Recall here the pragmatist insistence on the intertwining of belief and action.)

Psychotherapy is a practice that is also a form of knowledge. Its own actions of personality intervention are structured by, and in turn structure an entire inferential network of which the DSM is one of the prime expressions. Again in turn, those who are subject to this social practice—patients, their families, therapists, hospitals, clinics, as well as insurance companies and state welfare agencies—adopt, to one extent or another, the understandings and self-understandings characteristic of this practice; inasmuch as they are immersed in the inferential networks of this practice, these understandings and self-understandings make sense and can be justified.

One might object here that the example of psychotherapy is a skewed one. Of course, psychotherapy, since it intervenes in people's lives, is subject to power relations of the kind Foucault discusses, but how far can we push this point? How pervasive is the relation between practices, knowledge, and power? Does it extend, for instance, to the practice of baseball?

I believe we can answer this question in the affirmative. The claim is not that all practices have the same level of depth or influence when it comes to relations of power and knowledge. If that were the case, then it would have been just as expedient for Foucault to study baseball as psychotherapeutic practice. Rather, the idea is that, to one extent or another, power and knowledge, and particularly their relationship, arises within practices. So in the case of baseball one might find it operating, at least at the margins—indeed it is not difficult to imagine such a case. Think, for instance, of a baseball player who is about to give a public speech being told that he is "on deck." The implication here is that the person is about to engage in a competitive activity whose goal is to win something, whether that be audience's respect, other speaking engagements, or something else. Inasmuch as this person understands himself through the game of baseball, transferring the image of being on deck to other activities promotes a competitive self-understanding, which generates beliefs and actions engaged with the world in a competitive mode.

It might be pointed out here that not only baseball players, but other people as well are subject to the locution of being on deck. This is true. It is also true that people who are not in psychotherapy are subject to influences from that practice. Practices do not exist in isolation. They are intertwined and pervade our culture and society in different ways and to different extents. Moreover, an individual's immersion in different practices can cause cross-fertilization of the power/knowledge effects of those practices within his or her beliefs, actions, and engagements. What Foucault offers in focusing on the level of practices as his unit of historical and genealogical inquiry is not a specialized or narrow analytic, but instead a way of understanding ourselves and how we got to be who we are through the most common and pervasive ways in which we engage with the world. The addition I have made to Foucault's own claim about practices is that it is in the practices that the power/knowledge relationships

are to be found. Even this is not an addition so much as a clarification that allows us to see more straightforwardly the relationship between his work and pragmatism.

Having made this clarification, though, we must ask about that relationship. What is the implication of all this for pragmatism? It lies in introducing a complexity that appears to have escaped James and, to a lesser extent, Dewey, for whom the success of a practice lay in its ability to help us navigate the world. If Foucault's genealogical approach is helpful, the concept of success must itself be investigated rather than being a sort of "unexplained explainer."[17] Successful navigation of the world seems to be a matter of accomplishing one's goals better or more efficiently or more meaningfully. This being said, we might ask, what are the self-understandings tied up with particular senses of success? If, for instance, we are produced to one extent or another to be psychological beings with personalities of the type that psychotherapy promotes, then success will be defined in psychotherapeutic terms. This, in turn, has its own political effects, effects Foucault has traced in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. These effects are not always ones we would, on reflection, seek to ratify. Some of them, for example the making-docile of human bodies, are, in Foucault's term, intolerable. We cannot, then, take the notion of success or the idea of navigating the world more successfully at face value. We must see it as the name of a problem to be investigated rather than a solution to be attained. This, it seems to me, is a point that would deepen pragmatism without violating any of its central commitments. It would, instead, offer a historical dimension to pragmatist thought.

Success in navigating the world is not a given. Rather, one is successful within particular parameters, and those parameters have political inflections. It is not only that the parameters provide territorial borders within which one can have more or less success in one's navigation. The problem is deeper: what counts as success as well as what is encouraged or discouraged (or even prohibited) in the name of that success are political matters. They are matters of whom we have been shaped to be and what our understanding and self-understanding consists in.

We might, from another angle, locate the difference between Foucault and the pragmatists and neo-pragmatists this way. For the latter, pragmatism is a matter of what is practical; while for Foucault, pragmatism is a matter of taking our practices as the unit of analysis. What gives Foucault's work its force, and what makes it relevant for pragmatism, is that it is through our practices what is considered practical arises for us. We cannot take the practical, or successful within it, as a given. That is the lesson of his genealogies.

Foucault's work does not, of course, replace classical pragmatism or neo-pragmatism. Pragmatism's emphasis on the bond between belief and action and between them and the world remain relevant for us. Even its notion of successful navigation of the world, suitably complicated by political analysis, has much to say. If what I have argued here is right, rather than seeing Foucault's work as a replacement of pragmatism, we ought to see it in a line that extends from James and Dewey through Rorty to Foucault (even if the chronology of the latter two must at moments be reversed). Pragmatism has offered us a powerful philosophical perspective on the intertwining of our selves and our world, no doubt as powerful as the best of

[17] I am grateful to Colin Koopman for suggesting this helpful term.

the phenomenological tradition. Seeing Foucault's work engaged with that tradition does not permit us to surpass it, but instead to add a dimension to its already rich tradition.

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