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Pragmatism and the Mass Public

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Abstract

This article examines public opinion as it relates to the primary tenets of the pragmatic philosophy. Anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, and an emphasis on practical consequences are observed in American public opinion. In addition, there is strong support for pragmatic politics in America. The evidence suggests that pragmatism is a common cultural attribute in American society.

Keywords

pragmatism – public opinion – American politics – anti-foundationalism – fallibilism – consequentialism

1 Introduction

The “American” in American pragmatism is typically a reference to the nationality of the philosophers who developed the school of thought. But to what extent are ordinary Americans pragmatic in their thinking about the important issues facing their country? Is pragmatism a philosophy shared by most Americans, or is it merely a philosophy developed by intellectual elites who happened to reside in America? This article argues that pragmatic thinking is common among the American mass public. When reviewing American public opinion one finds that the mass public is indeed pragmatic in its orientation toward social and political issues. This suggests that pragmatism is a common cultural attribute shared by most Americans.

2 Anti-foundationalism

Anti-foundationalism is at the core of the pragmatic philosophy. Charles Peirce was the first to develop what would later become known as pragmatism as part of his effort to develop a new anti-Cartesian philosophy. Descartes is best known for his maxim, “I think therefore I am” (Wilson 1976, xix). This developed because Descartes was concerned about the nature of reality. How do we know when something is real? Are sense perceptions enough for us to define the real? Descartes imagined a world where our sense perceptions could be mere illusions, “Suppose, then, that all the things that I see are fake” (Descarte 1976, 171). In that world, what use would our sense perceptions be? Our only source of knowledge would have to come from within us and the only thing that we could know for certain was that we were thinking and with that, at least, we could know we existed (Wilson 1976).

The problem with this thought experiment is that once a person starts to question reality we quickly devolve into radical skepticism where nothing at all could ever be proven, even one’s own existence. To prevent us from falling into the trap of radical skepticism Descartes introduced foundationalism as a principle that would find beliefs that were *a priori* to our experiences (Bacon 2012, 19). Pragmatists reject this foundationalism. According to Janet Horne,

Traditional, rationalist-based ethics relies on *a priori* criteria for decision making. These exist independently of the immediate situation. Thus, criteria precede events in time. In contrast, pragmatic ethics are based on temporally based judgments of the consequences of results of actions and decisions. Criteria are created in time. Horne 2001, 150

That is there are no permanent or fixed guidelines for determining what is real or what is right. Instead, pragmatism makes decisions based on the anticipated consequences of those decisions without holding firm to any one theory of action or belief. Pragmatism has a strongly empirical orientation. “The empiricists held that knowledge of the world is derived not from *a priori* principles but from sensory experience” (Bacon 2012, 36). The pragmatists favored, “radical empiricism, in which propositions would be evaluated by their observable, their demonstrable, consequences rather than by their antecedents” (Posner 2004, 144). Under pragmatism we could not retreat into our own imaginations to find proof of the real,

we could only rely on the material world as we actually experienced it to form our judgments.

William James, who was the first to use the term “pragmatism” to describe Peirce’s theory, was also anti-foundationalism and critical of Cartesianism.

James says,

A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. James 1907, 51

The rejection of *a priori* reasons or principles is at the core of pragmatic philosophy. A pragmatist would never rely on fixed principles or absolutes when considering ideas or actions.

Later, John Dewey would echo these sentiments. There are no, “first principles or foundational beliefs” in Dewey’s philosophy, “There are, rather, beliefs which we steer by, and our confidence in them is provisional” (Bacon 2012, 50).

Once again we see the pragmatic opposition to foundationalism,

Every proposition concerning truth is really in the last analysis hypothetical and provisional, although a large number of these propositions have been so frequently verified without failure that we are justified in using them as if they were absolutely true. But, logically, absolute truth is an ideal which cannot be realized, or as James says ‘bagged,’ and until it is no longer possible to make other observations and other experiences. Pragmatism, thus, presents itself as an extension of historical empiricism, but with this fundamental difference, that it does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena. Dewey 1931, 24

By being anti-foundationalist pragmatism allows, or even encourages, the modification of beliefs. This indeterminism emerges from the practicality of the American mindset. While discussing empiricism and instrumentalism Dewey says,

That is the reason for our insistence on the teleological phase of thought and knowledge. If it must be teleological in particular and contemporary pragmatism 13 (2016) 169-180

not merely true in the abstract, that is probably due to the practical element which is found in all the phases of American life.... It is beyond doubt that the

Table 1 *Anti-Foundationalism*

As I read a pair of statements please tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own views – even if neither is exactly right. 1 – There are things that are just wrong regardless of the situation. 2 – What is right or wrong almost always depends on the situation.1

There are things that are just wrong regardless of the situation	43%
What is right or wrong almost always depends on the situation	54%
Don't Know	2%

Sources

- 1 Survey by: Public Religion Research Institute, Millennials, Religion and Abortion Survey, Apr, 2011. Retrieved Mar-29-2015 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

progressive and unstable character of American life and civilization has facilitated the birth of a philosophy which regards the world as being in continuous formation, where there is still place for indeterminism, for the new, and for a real future. Dewey 1931, 33

Americans can't be limited by stable principles or absolute truths because it would limit their ability to find innovative solutions to philosophical, political, or technological problems.

Dewey made these claims about Americans before the rise of modern public opinion polling. However, Dewey's hypothesis proves to be true when one reviews recent survey results. When Americans are asked simply whether they believe in an ethical framework that relies on immutable criteria for determining what is right and wrong or in a conception of justice that is dependent on real world situations, most Americans reject absolute standards of morality and adopt an ethics based on situational awareness. Eighty years after Dewey's observations most Americans continue to reflect a pragmatic worldview.

3 Fallibilism

People form beliefs that may or may not be true. Peirce suggests, “for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false” (Peirce 1877, 51). This introduces the concept of fallibilism into pragmatic theory. “Fallibilism is the view that one’s knowledge is always in some sense liable to error” (Almeder 1982, 57). If one acknowledges that one can be mistaken, one can’t claim anything with certainty. As a result pragmatism takes on a wishy-washy character of indeterminacy that is frustrating to rationalists and foundationalists.

Peirce acknowledges objections to this account of truth. He notes that it may appear to identify the real with what is *thought* to be real.... He insists on the difference between what any particular community might happen to think and what inquiry in general will eventually conclude, this is no indication of its truth. Bacon 2012, 26

The claim that “we might be wrong” would not come as any surprise to most people, but it does undercut one of the key elements of foundationalism in philosophy because foundationalism requires that at least some things be absolutely certain.

James is also committed to the doctrine of fallibilism, “we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood” (James 1907, 223). Truths and falsehoods are only temporary constructions and are subject to change. This seems to be the case in Americans’ thinking about the Iraq war. Initially, a supermajority of Americans supported the u.s. intervention in Iraq. By 2011, however, public sentiment had soured and a supermajority opposed the war. Indeed, most Americans thought invading Iraq was a “mistake” and most thought it was “a dumb thing to do.” At one point it was true that most Americans thought invading Iraq was a good idea, later this would become false. Americans aren’t above a *mea culpa* every now and then.

4 Emphasis on Practical Consequences

James didn’t want to waste his time with inconsequential debates, “The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (James

1907, 45). If the differences had no practical consequences, then pragmatism would view the differences as irrelevant.

James explicitly states that our beliefs should depend on what is beneficial, “I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true *unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit*” (James 1907, 77). And the only possible threat to our self-created truths is our other self-created truths, “The greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths” (James

Table 2 *Fallibilism*

Would you favor or oppose having u.s. forces take military action against Iraq to force Saddam Hussein from power?1	
Favor	72%
Oppose	24%
No Opinion	5%
Do you approve or disapprove of the United States taking military action against Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power?2	
Approve	78%
Disapprove	19%
Don't Know/No Answer	3%
Do you favor or oppose the u.s. war in Iraq?3	
Favor	29%
Oppose	68%
No Opinion	9%
In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?4	
Yes	53%
No	46%
No Opinion	2%
Would you say that the initial decision to send u.s. troops to Iraq in 2003 was a smart thing to do or a dumb thing to do?5	
Smart	45%
Dumb	51%
Mixed (Vol.)	2%
No Opinion	2%

Sources

- 1 Survey by: abc News Poll, December 18 - December 19, 2001. Retrieved Mar-24-2014 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

- 2 Survey by: cbs News Poll, April 26 - April 27, 2003. Retrieved Mar-6-2014 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
- 3 Survey by: Cable News Network. cnn/orc International Poll, Nov, 2011. Retrieved Mar-12-2015 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
- 4-5 Survey by: Cable News Network. cnn/orc International Poll, Dec, 2011. Retrieved Feb-2-2014 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

1907, 78). Pragmatism understands that people may have competing values and that individuals may have to choose between two or more competing options each with its own costs and benefits.

What makes James exceptional is his view that competing and contradictory beliefs do not have to be reconciled, “But as I have enough trouble in life already without adding the trouble of carrying these intellectual inconsistencies, I personally just give up the Absolute. I just *take* my moral holidays; or else as a professional philosopher, I try to justify them by some other principle” (James 1907, 78–9). Without reservation he is saying he can believe and justify whatever he pleases even if it conflicts with his other beliefs. Rescher states, “James is one of philosophy’s few real opportunists – that is, someone who rejects the need to worry about consistency when it conflicts with the desiderata of the moment” (Rescher 2000, 23). When faced with an inconsistency James reiterates, “for I fully believe in the legitimacy of taking moral holidays” (James 1907, 79). For James there is no need to even attempt to reconcile his contradictory beliefs because he can take “moral holidays” from his beliefs and replace them with other beliefs to suit his needs.

Dewey was also very concerned with the consequences of choices and actions. Dewey defined pragmatism as, “a philosophy which finds the ultimate measure of intelligence in consideration of a desirable future and in search for the means of bringing it progressively into existence” (Dewey 1917, 121). For Dewey a key component of pragmatism is “the doctrine of the value of consequences” (Dewey 1931, 25). When thinking about the world a pragmatist would look toward the future and the projected consequences of particular choices to provide insights that would allow for beneficial decision making.

Dewey is concerned with the world as it is, “From Dewey’s perspective, those who insist on abstract and universal Truths have little to offer when it comes to actively engaging the world in which we live” (Kadlec 2007, 21). He believes that philosophy must concern itself with real problems of everyday life and that we must pay attention to the practical consequences of our actions, “From a pragmatist perspective, the terms of these concrete

advantages and disadvantages include considering the consequences of proposed courses of action” (Horne 2001, 152–3). By balancing competing claims and looking for concrete advantages pragmatists seek the best outcomes.

Most Americans seem to conform to precisely this type decision making. When they are asked about the morality of genetic engineering on humans, most American believe the practice is “morally wrong” and “against God’s will.” However, if altering human genes would cure people with “fatal diseases,” most Americans would support the practice and alter their own genes under those circumstances. Americans would take a “moral holiday,” as James calls it,

Table 3 *Emphasis on Practical Consequences*

Do you think altering human genes is morally wrong, or don't you feel this way?1	
Yes, morally wrong	53%
No	39%
Not sure	9%
Do you think altering human genes is against God's will, or don't you feel this way?2	
Yes, against God's will	58%
No	36%
Not sure	6%
Suppose you were told after an examination of your genes that you were going to get one of these incurable diseases, would you go ahead with the treatment to have your genes changed or not?2	
Would go ahead with treatment	57%
Would not	33%
Not sure	10%
Now let me ask you some questions about genetic engineering. Some people are worried about this science, arguing that in changing the basic makeup of people's cells, it is like playing God. But let me ask you, if it is possible to cure people with fatal diseases by altering their genes, do you feel they ought to be allowed to go ahead with such treatment, or do you think it is going too far?4	
Ought to be allowed to go ahead	64%
Is going too far	24%
Not sure	12%
Now I'd like to ask about something you may not have heard about before--genetic engineering. This is the science of altering genes, which are the building blocks of life for humans, animals and plants. Genetic engineering changes genes to produce particular characteristics in living things. If it is	

possible to cure people with fatal diseases by altering their genes, do you feel they ought to be allowed to do this, or do you think this is going too far?⁵

Allowed	65%
Going too far	28%
Don't know	7%

Sources

- 1–2 Survey by: Time/cnn/Yankelovich Partners Poll, Dec, 1993. Retrieved Feb-25–2014 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
- 3–4 Survey by: Business Week/Harris Poll, Nov, 1985. Retrieved Feb-25–2014 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
- 5 Survey by: Great American tv Poll #2, Jan, 1991. Retrieved Feb-25–2014 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

because remaining alive is better than the alternative. An action might be immoral in the abstract, but if the action produced beneficial consequences, then Americans are perfectly willing to appeal to alternative values. Being allowed to do what one pleases provides Americans with a sense of freedom that is highly cherished. Of course, remaining alive is at the very base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943). Abstract principles of morality may be what they may, but in the end Americans would choose what is practically beneficial to them.

5 Support for Pragmatic Politics

Americans also want their politicians to be pragmatic. An overwhelming majority would prefer to have a president that seeks “practical solutions” to problems. Recent polls suggest that Americans believe that President Obama does a better job than the Republican Party in being “pragmatic and solution oriented.” They also believe that the Republican Party would be more likely to win elections if they focused on “pragmatic solutions” instead of adhering to “conservative principles.” When it comes to cooperating with undemocratic governments, most Americans believe it is “wrong but necessary” to do so. Once again we see Americans willing to abandon absolute principles in favor of solution oriented decision making. The “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action is of secondary importance to the necessity or usefulness of it.

6 Conclusions

Most Americans are pragmatists. There is evidence to suggest that Americans support anti-foundationalism and fallibilism. They are concerned with the practical consequences of actions and prefer pragmatic politicians who look for solutions to America's problems. This isn't to say that all Americans share this philosophy, certainly a significant minority are likely to be absolutist and ideological in their way of thinking. But it does suggest that American philosophy was influenced by the cultural milieu of the United States. A country with such diversity in ethnic groups and religious traditions would require a pragmatic worldview to survive. In economic and social activities Americans must cooperate with too many different kinds of people to remain rigidly loyal to any one set of philosophical precepts. America's pragmatic philosophers codified what was and is an important part of America's cultural attributes.

Table 4 *Pragmatic Politics*

What are you looking for in a u.s. president? Please tell me how important each of the following are to you in looking for a u.s. president. Would you say extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important? Ability to find practical solutions to major problems.¹

Extremely important	41%
Very important	49%
Somewhat important	8%
Not too important	1%
Not at all important	1%
Don't know	1%

I am going to read a list of issues and I want you to tell me whether, overall, you think Barack Obama or the Republicans would do a better job with this issue. If you do not know, just tell me and we will move on to the next item. Being pragmatic and solution oriented?²

Obama much better	36%
Obama somewhat better	19%
Republicans somewhat better	13%
Republicans much better	14%
Both (vol.)	1%
Neither (vol.)	1%
Don't know/Refused	12%

As you may know, in recent weeks two Republicans, Utah Governor John Huntsman and radio host Rush Limbaugh, have suggested two different paths that the Republican Party could take to reverse its losing streak and start winning elections again. I am going to read you a pair of statements that summarize these two views. After I read these statements, please tell me which one you agree with more. John Huntsman says that the Republican Party has been losing elections because it became narrowly focused on very conservative issues that do not appeal to most Americans. It can only return to relevance by moving to the middle on issues such as the environment and immigration and offering pragmatic solutions that appeal to groups like the youth and minorities that have tuned the party out. Rush Limbaugh says that the Republican Party has been losing elections because moderate factions within the party has driven it away from its core conservative principles. If it does not stamp out these factions it will be guaranteed to continue losing elections. Americans are conservatives at heart and the blueprint for Republican victory is to embrace the Reagan revolution and return to conservative values. Which statement do you agree with more?³

Huntsman statement strongly	32%
Huntsman statement somewhat	25%
Limbaugh statement somewhat	16%
Limbaugh statement strongly	21%
Neither (vol.)	1%
Don't know/Refused	5%

Do you think it's right, wrong but sometimes necessary, or always wrong for the u.s. to cooperate with harsh, undemocratic governments in order to fight terrorism?⁴

Right	17%
Wrong but sometimes necessary	64%
Always wrong	13%
Don't know	5%

Sources

- 1 Survey by: Civil Society Institute, Views on Political Leadership Survey, Feb, 2008. Retrieved Mar-29-2015 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
- 2 Survey by: Democracy Corps Poll, Apr, 2009. Retrieved Mar-29-2015 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
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- 4 Survey by: Public Agenda Foundation, Confidence in us Foreign Policy Index Poll, Jan, 2006. Retrieved Mar-29-2015 from the ipoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

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