

PRAGMATISM HOTEL

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A metaphoric definition of pragmatism that many people know was given is writer Giovanni Papini's; according to it pragmatism is like a hotel corridor, on which many different rooms open up but through which it is inevitable to pass (p.89).

What is at stake in the essays collected in this much needed book is the pleasant discovery that pragmatism is not just the 'American' philosophy par excellence, but that it is rather an inevitable crossroad of so many different philosophical currents and orientations, that its deployments over more than one century involve in equal measure European and overseas contexts.

This book, edited with extreme precision and care, felicitously recognizes an osmosis between the two 'worlds', an osmosis that is comparable to the one occurred in the arts in the same years, when the European avant-garde met with the American abstraction and fueled in feedback all the subsequent artistic expressions in the Western world. In a similar spirit historical encounters such as James with Bergson, Bergson with the members of the Italian journal 'Leonardo', the 'Leonardo' and James; or, more subtly, the virtual intertwining between the philosophies of Peirce, James and Husserl, show how much richer and rhyzomatic the Western philosophical milieus of the late XIX and the XX centuries must have been than our historical accounts have ever presented. Reading this book is like discovering, within the scope of Western philosophical ideas, a historical paradigm that has been concealed or belittled or even distorted for a long time and for reasons that must be quite complex and imponderable to be even brought up; though one of the reasons might very likely be the factitious distinction

between Europe and America, between a 'classical' ancient heritage and a 'new' challenge to it.

Fundamental concepts of the XX-century turn such as: world-of-life, action, givenness, 'things', phenomena, appear to emerge simultaneously both in Europe and the United States, like 'memes' moving from one continent to another one via influential personalities's journeys, meetings, publications, conferences.

This 'pragmatism hotel' opens its doors with Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism, which, being an inspiration to Nietzsche, introduces the individual's force of invention as basis for all thinking and intellectual commitment. America is mature enough to speak a native language after being hostage to the old world (as was D.H. Lawrence's assumption in his seminal book about American writers: *Studies in American Literature*, 1923). We could say that those intellectuals were 'making' America through the attempt to get rid of the old European rhetoric that was losing its grip on the *concrete* reality of a *concrete* environment, based on the rationalistic claim of the capability to know the actual world independently of its flowing, that is, evolutionary, potential and creative, character. Author A.M. Nieddu reminds us how Emersonian suggestions, far from being obsolete, are retrieved in different forms by Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell in their respective concerns about a language that overcomes any distinction between genres and linguistic styles, through Emerson's notion of 'poetic judgment' and Romantic tradition (p.31).

The pragmatistic adventure is furtherly analyzed by A. Parravicini in the contribution the 'Metaphysical Club' gave to its development, a short-lived but crucial context offered to young philosophers such as James and Peirce, who, thanks to regular meetings probably occurred within 1872, elaborated their first intuitions. The club allowed for a free environment, not being jeopardized by the authority principle and academic power that had governed in Europe since the Middle Ages! Being active in a wide range of disciplines, from mathematics to astronomy, to evolutionary theories

and ethics, they had the ease to re-invent a philosophical language under the guidance of mathematician Chauncey Wright (wonderfully re-discovered by Louis Menand in *The Metaphysical Club*, 2001), who, although dying only three years after the end of the Club, laid the building blocks of pragmatism: the evolutionary theory expounded by Darwin, the paradigm shift that passed from the concern with causes to the cognitive projection on effects.

That events can be better explained by observing their *actual*, or predicting their *possible* effects, rather than by hypothesizing their causes, introduced the value of the empirical test, without falling into the abstractions of Anglo-Saxon empiricism, or the fetish of the data. An original insight by Chauncey Wright was the notion of 'exaptation': the ability of the human species to apply an ability in one field to other fields of cognition and action (recently cognitive scientist Merlin Donald has developed and experimentally corroborated a similar notion of generativity) (M. Donald, *The Origin of the Modern Mind*, 1991).

The ground for the pragmatist anti-idealism and anti-monocausality was laid. Peirce and James were ready to take up the baton.

As G. Maddalena explains in his perspicuous analysis and pleasant narrative way, the extravagant attitudes of the members of the Metaphysical Club deeply influenced Peirce's impetuous style of thinking that accounts for both his freedom from academic requirements and his difficulty in being recognized by peer academics. Peirce was able to metabolize European Kantianism and to give a new account of it in the light of the emergent Darwinism: the way to know things is an activity that absorbs the object to be known, ontology and epistemology coincide; a Kantian conclusion counterbalanced by the necessary consequence (already tackled by Hegel with opposed results) that representation, from both a logical and semiological perspective, doesn't leave any remainder of an unknown object: Peirce introduces the idea of phenomenology that Husserl was elaborating in the same years. Though it

is unlikely for Husserl to have known Peirce, Peirce may have known Husserl through James. A new discipline like semiotics enters the scene, later developed by Charles Morris: representations are signs that turn even logic into a bio-social phenomenon (p. 148).

From these complex interactions it is easy to imagine the osmotic dynamics that was going on among the young philosophers of the early XX century on both sides of the ocean.

If we can easily find a Kantian, even a Hegelian legacy in Peirce's over-abundance of sources, also some intimations of an anti-scientist attitude - in the name of a defense of science - are present in some of his writings: the current revisitation today of the issue of 'objectivity' - we think of the Speculative Realism or the OOO philosophies - might find an original and strong issue in what he called the 'scientific method', which far from following rationalism, didn't rely upon the over-confidence of the given existence of an object, but on the fact that different representations of the world, though necessarily mediated by sign systems, would converge 'in the long run' (p. 53).

To which, in the feedback we hinted at before, John Maynard Keynes - who employed Peirce way before his rediscovery - ironically replied: 'In the long run we are all dead' (J.M. Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability*).

Against the now obsolete ideology of verificationism, Peirce proposed a version of it that does not exclude the vitality of doubt, uneasiness and even error (p.52). Fallibilism is therefore introduced as an antidote to both scientific foundationalism and the anti-scientific attitude.

In focusing on the actual concrete inferential work of the mind (especially in the logic of abduction (re-discovered in Italy by U. Eco in the Seventies), Peirce shows to be a path-finder in the recent development of the cognitive sciences that, dismissing the rigidity of cognitivism, are more inclined to describe thinking as a flexible activity: by way of example, Peirce may have anticipated the neurological research of McClelland's *Parallel Distributed Processing*, or Damasio's *somatic markers*.

Finding connections where there seemed to be none, Massimo Ferrari shows that, if the exchanges between the two continents were steady and effective, it was certainly due to William James, whose academic position allowed him to travel and function as a relay: he met Bergson and Husserl and had them meet – however virtually – the American philosophers of his time. Probably following the Metaphysical Club inspiration, James, like Peirce, imparts logic a psychological direction: the real work of the mind brings in itself a *concrete* logical activity: any inferential activity is accompanied by a physiological modification (p. 78).

The psychological perspective, probably mutated from Wundt, introduces the phenomenological ideas of correlation, intentionality, projection. The tenacity of ‘belief’ replaces the comfort of rational a priori ideas, and the openness of possibilities overpowers the claim of a dead totality (p.86) and it is within the scope of possibilities, that is, effects and projections, that we name anything as the ‘truth’.

And it was Josiah Royce who shared the issue with James: there might be a risk of a weaker version of pragmatism, that can be mistaken as relativism, if the emphasis is on the truth as a temporary and subjective conviction (p.99): a solution may be that every truth be tested by data that are not conceived as ‘external objects’ but as modes of action (p. 105), as R. Fabbrichesi’s essay shows.

It is in fact by virtue of an emphasis on the experimental method, both in science and in pedagogy, that John Dewey orientates his own development of the previous generation’s intuitions. His convergence with the notions of ‘lived experience’ and ‘embodied mind’ is made quite apparent here (pp. 115). Especially today we can look at his didactic method - called ‘Dewey’s Schools’ (one example is the ‘New School of Social Research’, co-founded with Veblen and others, in New York in 1919) - as an incredibly update model for an education that implies the active and interactive role of students and professors, and a complete independence from criteria that are not strictly intellectual.

Concepts like inquiry, exploration, environment, problem-solving, radical democracy seem to be absolutely suitable for any current discussion about politics, ethics, education, or even aesthetics, discussion that are free from and do not undergo the economic-political pressure of education as is exerted in our Universities today (R. Calcaterra and R. Frega, p.121 and ff).

As Dewey’s stance on ethics finds a further advancement in Sidney Hook and Morton White (the naturalization of ethics and politics described by A. Boncompagni), his idea of the dynamic, exploratory value of philosophical thinking is inherited by Mead: their common work on functionalism in psychology – as opposed to structuralism – may recall the general systems theory, in its issue on interactive, non-linear and non-causalistic, teleological strategies among systems.

A line of thought becomes clear that involves James, Dewey, Mead and concerns the relationship between aim and environment (p.142).

Particularly interesting is the space given to the Italian pragmatists Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini, young intellectual who, deeply fascinated by pragmatism as a philosophy that was “viva, vissuta, eccitatrice di vita!” (p.177) in early XX century wanted to meet Bergson in Paris and James in Rome, inviting them to contribute to the philosophical journal ‘Leonardo’ (1903-1907) that they had founded. American pragmatism was welcomed as a counterbalance to the outdated idealism that governed Italian intellectuals of the time and it is not by chance that Papini was a writer and a poet, who by vocation needed a ‘live’ philosophy both in the form of thinking and in the style of expression. And it is not by chance that we feel, through Maddalena’s analysis, both Nietzsche’s influence (Maddalena calls them ‘existential pragmatists’) and the futurists’ style, also present in minor thinkers like Vailati and Calderoni, who expanded the scope of reflection to science and law: experimenting, testing and finding evidence are not only means of verification but the very creative core of knowledge (p.186).

The second part of the book, which focuses on the successive branching off of the historical group of philosophers, shows how much the latest productions in different philosophical fields owe to that first source, and singles out a wide range of current arguments such as the reformulation of the a priori notion: according to R. Calcaterra, Clarence Irving Lewis (p. 161) reconfigures the a priori as a creative disposition of the mind to regulate and classify; an argument quite similar to Josiah Royce's (p.105): even when we deny classification, we do it by classifying (incidentally, one of Royce's students happened to be the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener). This is a non-prescriptive a priori, but one purely and freely chosen to give nature an order. Actually it was Peirce who said that when we talk about the 'order of nature' we can't demonstrate it, but a nature that is not ordered is inconceivable. The existence of an independent 'law' that accounts for anything we call 'nature' is a necessary part of the structure of the mind.

Defending the a priori is to defend the dynamic (and not eternal) value of the human mind, as Calcaterra states (p. 162), against the basic verificationism of the experimental sciences. What is at stake here is a form of thinking and knowing that relies upon an inevitable but dynamic structure, in the sense that it is open to possible in-progress meanings, though (and here we find the anti-relativist stance of the pragmatists) not all meanings are possible, due to the constant test of the effects.

In fact, concerning the role of the 'effects' in knowledge, it is interesting to be reminded how Quine himself recognized his debt to pragmatism: his critique of pure a priori or a posteriori judgements rests upon the premise that they depend without exception on cultural postulates, on their 'use', on the continuum of experience, in one word, on the resistance that 'effects' oppose to contradictions, and not on their causes.

Concerning anti-relativism, Donald Davidson's principle charity recalls the pragmatistic idea (particularly Peircian, lately shared by Joseph Margolis'

constructivism, p. 276) that experience is a complex activity, which includes among its conditions *presuppositions* of truth and justice. If that is the case, the very micro-relativity of any individual 'truth' overcomes relativism, being itself based on a wider picture that is collectively stated and shared (p. 215); what we call 'mind' is not an entity but a collective activity.

In this light we can read Habermas' and Apel's notion of intersubjectivity as a ground for a new kind of universalism, as shown by M. Failla to be the legacy of Peirce's argument of continuity, in close connection with 'Habermas' transcendental community. Real – as Failla argues about Apel – is one and the same as knowable (p. 229).

It is Wilfrid Sellars's critique of an allegedly bare 'given' to be scientifically verified that casts light on the role of the effect in knowledge: any 'data' are caught in the dynamics of the consequences (though these are not to be seen in a utilitarian perspective), a dynamics that protects human experience from being possibly overpowered by the 'scientific image'. As a peculiar way to humanism, Sellars's pragmatic stance retrieves the concept of 'truth' as a matter of creativity, intentionality, responsibility (p. 205).

'Consequence' becomes a complex epistemological factor: an intertwining of sensorial response, production of facts, inference of future effects in behaviors, evolutionary values.

It is exactly due to the case of absence of causes that we construct our in-progress convictions.

G. Marchetti, in analyzing the adventures of Putnam's internal realism shows how much the variants and turns that the concept undergoes over time in Putnam's philosophy, show how 'realism' is as necessary as limited: epistemological conclusions are not justified by testing *data* but by a continuous re-elaboration of *theories*, that keeps them in a condition of being *acceptable* (we like to recall that 'acceptability' has the same etimological origin of the term 'probability', from: probation, 'approve'). But on the

other hand, if the proof of the truth is always temporary as always grounded upon effects, and any relationship between observation and effect undermines the distinction facts/values, as facts must be necessarily related to the selective perception that observation is, Putnam accepts none the less the anti-relativist suggestion (that the notion of 'theory-laden facts' may have provided) of pragmatism by considering the element of contingency as an indubitable 'independence' of facts from the mind (p.295-7).

This book rounds off its analyses with the greatest contribution to a revival of pragmatism: Calcaterra's essay deeply analyzes Richard Rorty's intellectual path, whose pragmatistic legacy is quite explicit and complex: his departure from the analytic philosophers' milieu, probably due to contacts with intellectual figures like Thomas Kuhn or Quentin Skinner, imparted a pragmatistic orientation to his successive and most influential philosophy.

Going back to Dewey, Rorty shifts the focus from the 'eternal to the future' (p.311): the task of philosophy passes from the analytic tool for truth definitions to the pragmatic force of transformation, both ethical and political. Any representationalism is over, if thinking cannot ignore the challenges of contingency: to the claim of an alleged independence of the 'real', Rorty's adamant writing responds through the reformulations of knowledge as an 'art', and with an ethics of solidarity as the true necessity of the human 'condition'.

In the final but open-ended conclusion of the book, S. Marchetti selects the still to come complex legacy and development of pragmatism, including figures like Susan Haack, Cornel West, Robert Brandom and Richard Schusterman.

Definitely this synthetic and complete history of pragmatism shows for the first time the force of clarification (beyond the hyper-complexity of the European legacy) of the task of philosophy but also and especially a force of freedom and invention in authentic philosophical thinking. What Russell ironically called

'transatlantic truth' was actually the cradle of real intellectuals, who claimed for themselves a social, moral and educational role, so much forgotten today in times of the 'professional' philosophers (as explicitly argued by John McDermott, p.271).

The intellectual adventures of philosophy are to be found in personalities and their communities, rather than in academies. (An ideally related book might be *The Last Intellectuals*, Russell Jacoby, 1987, NY, which analyses the transformation of American intellectuals into professionals from the 60s to the 90s).

As a tentative conclusion, after the paradoxes of relativism, the scholastics of analytic philosophies, and even *after* the conservative and dead-ended attempts to retrieve 'objectivity', on the part of currents like Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented-Ontologies, pragmatism contributes with a new language to these ongoing discussions. This book makes it necessary to re-write the history of philosophical ideas in a non-Eurocentric way, and to recreate epistemological and intellectual connections and affiliations, that spread out like 'memes' transmitted by brilliant minds and living beings, through friendship, intellectual exchange and engagement, new interpretations and paradigm shifts.