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# Pragmatism as an attitude

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The preoccupation of experience with things which are coming (are now coming, not just to come) is obvious to any one whose interest in experience is empirical. Since we live forward; since we live in a world where changes are going on whose issue means our weal or woe; since every act of ours modifies these changes and hence is fraught with promise, or charged with hostile energies—what should experience be but a future implicated in a present!

John Dewey (1917, 49)

## 1. Introduction

When we speak of pragmatism as a philosophical doctrine, what sort of school of thought are we referring to? For Charles Sanders Peirce, the founding father of the tradition and the self-acclaimed coiner of the term itself, pragmatism was first and foremost a *theory* according to which, "the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life" (Peirce, 1905b, 332). To understand fully the conception of any expression, we should thus strip it to all those experimental phenomena which the affirmation of the concept could imply, and understand that there is "*absolutely nothing more in it*" (Peirce, 1905b, 332). This way of analyzing the meaning of a concept was for Peirce what pragmatism was all about. Growing tired of the way the term he had introduced "gets abused in merciless ways", he even renamed this doctrine into 'pragmaticism' in order to save it from kidnappers (Peirce, 1905b, 334–335). If we follow Peirce, pragmatism is

thus “merely a method of ascertaining the meanings of hard words and of abstract concepts” (Peirce, 1907, 400)—and nothing else.

Accordingly, pragmatism is more often than not associated with its theory—or rather theories—of meaning and truth. Peirce’s maxim of pragmatism is traditionally viewed as the starting point of the pragmatist movement, and it inspired William James to formulate his famous argument according to which any idea “which we can ride”, which is useful for our purposes, is “true *instrumentally*” (James 1907, 28). Despite the significant differences between James’ and Peirce’s conceptions of meaning and truth, pragmatism is often viewed as primarily epistemological project that aims to reduce the meaning of a concept in one way or another into its practical consequences. This is especially true of the non-pragmatist philosophers who often are surprisingly unwilling to examine pragmatism anywhere beyond this point.

But there is also another way of viewing pragmatism that does not associate it with any specific theories about truth or the nature of reality but rather with a certain kind of attitude expressed in one’s philosophical inquiry. James, Dewey and even Peirce all express opinions according to which they see a certain attitude to be the essential element in pragmatist philosophy. In his lecture on *What pragmatism means*, James (1907) primarily speaks of pragmatism as an attitude, and as a method for settling philosophical disputes. For him pragmatism is first a method and only secondly “a genetic theory of what is meant by truth” (James, 1907, 32). And pragmatism as a method means “no particular results”, but “only an attitude of orientation” that lies “in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel” (James, 1907, 27). Whatever specific problems pragmatists are puzzling over or whatever theories they are supporting in their individual hotel rooms, they nevertheless must pass through the corridor of pragmatist attitude. According to James then, the attitude—and not any specific doctrine or theory—is what lies at the core of pragmatism and unites different pragmatists.

This reading of James finds support in Dewey, who takes this attitude, or “temper of mind”, to be the most essential element of pragmatism for James (Dewey, 1908, 85). And Dewey himself echoes James’ approach by regarding “pragmatism as primarily a method”, and treating “the account of ideas and their truth and of reality somewhat incidentally so far as the discussion of them serves to exemplify or enforce the method” (Dewey, 1908, 86). So Dewey also makes it clear that pragmatism for him is primarily a method or an attitude.

Also some secondary sources have come to suggest that it was a certain attitude that united different pragmatism. Louis Menand, in his book *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, argued that what the four pragmatists—Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey—shared was a common attitude towards ideas (Menand, 2001, xi). Thus it seems that one possible way to conceive pragmatism is to look at it as an attitude. Accordingly, my purpose in this article is to make sense of this attitude that is said to be peculiar to pragmatism; to investigate what kind of attitude the pragmatists are referring to when they speak of *the pragmatist attitude*.

Before going to the actual content of this attitude I want to emphasize that I am not claiming that seeing pragmatism as an attitude is the only way to conceive pragmatism. The individual philosophers under the umbrella of pragmatism are so various and equipped with so different attitudes towards philosophy, humanity, nature of inquiry, and reality (see Haack, 2004), that it would be a futile task to try to convince my fellow colleagues that it is an attitude—and one specific attitude for that matter—that unites them all. As there seems to be as many pragmatisms as there are pragmatists<sup>1</sup> it is probable that there doesn't exist any necessary or sufficient group of criteria for pragmatism. Pragmatism might as well turn out to be a broad church of differing attitudes and theories that carry family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1953), without there necessary being any single doctrine that all pragmatists would be willing to sign.

Nevertheless, I aim to formulate one version of what this attitude behind pragmatism could be based on my reading of some key texts of the pragmatist tradition. In particular, I have chosen to concentrate on four writings, which emerged at a time when pragmatism had just started to gain prominence, and which explicitly aim to define pragmatism: Peirce's (1905b) article *What pragmatism is*, James' (1907) chapter *What pragmatism means* in the book *Pragmatism—A new name for some old ways of thinking*, Dewey's (1908) essay *What does pragmatism mean by practical?*, and Schiller's (1907) article *The Definition of Pragmatism and Humanism* in the book *Studies in Humanism*. Schiller might be a less obvious choice than the other three, but since both Peirce and James approvingly refer to Schiller in their own treatments of pragmatism, he seems to be a thinker worth including in this debate. Together these four articles published in the span

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase originates from Max Meyer's (1908, p. 326) pen. Since then it has been used countless times to characterize the diversity of thinking labeled as pragmatism (see for example Haack, 1996; Pihlström, 1996, pp. 9–10).

of couple of years and partially in direct response to each other represent an important historical dialogue where what we have come to call the pragmatist tradition was carved out.

## 2. The pragmatism for pragmatists—Peirce, James, and Dewey

I'll start this endeavor with a short outline of how the classical pragmatists, Peirce, James, and Dewey, come to define pragmatism. This provides the basis upon which the subsequent discussion about pragmatist attitude is built.

Peirce, as already discussed in the introduction, sees pragmatism first and foremost as a theory about the meaning of concepts where the "complete definition of the concept" comes from "all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply" (Peirce, 1905b, 332). Even though the label *pragmatism* was not used in print at that time, the doctrine was according to Peirce (1905a 346) captured into a maxim already in 1878 (often referred to as the *maxim of pragmatism*):

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.

Peirce, 1878, 132

However, although pragmatism as a doctrine is for Peirce explicitly tied up with his theory of meaning, this is not all there is to pragmatism (or pragmaticism as he comes to call it):

The bare definition of pragmaticism could convey no satisfactory comprehension of it to the most apprehensive of minds, but requires the commentary to be given below. Moreover, this definition takes no notice of one or two other doctrines without the previous acceptance (or virtual acceptance) of which pragmaticism itself would be a nullity.

Peirce, 1905b, 335

In other words, Peirce states that one can't adapt his doctrine of pragmaticism without already having accepted certain basic premises that can thus be seen in this sense as more fundamental than the doctrine itself. What then are these basic premises that Peirce refers to? He states that "they might all be included under the vague maxim, 'Dismiss make-believes.'" (Ibid., 335). This means that we should not accept any premises as given or puzzle ourselves with metaphysical 'truth.' Instead, "all you

have any dealings with are your doubts and beliefs, with the course of life that forces new beliefs upon you and gives you power to doubt old beliefs." (Ibid.,336). In other words, philosopher is in no position to step outside experiencing and be in contact with any eternal truths. Philosophical inquiry has to take place within one's situational life. Furthermore, the philosopher can't rely on any *a priori* givens that would provide a solid ground from which to set out on one's philosophical inquiry:

In truth, there is but one state of mind from which you can 'set out', namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do 'set out,'—a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed. Peirce, 1905b, 336

Furthermore, Peirce also tells us that before there was pragmatism as a theory, there was his "mind molded by his life in the laboratory", with led to the development of "the experimentalist's mind" (Peirce, 1905b, 331).<sup>2</sup> In generating pragmatism as a theory he was simply "endeavoring [...] to formulate what he so approved" (Ibid, 332). In other words, there was first the experimentalists way of thinking, which "the experimentalist himself can hardly be fully aware of" (Ibid, 331), which Peirce then attempted to formulate into a theory. So although Peirce wants to reserve the word pragmatism (or pragmaticism) for the theory, he is aware that there are certain attitudes or ways of thinking that underlie such theory.

William James, in turn, grants that Peirce's formulation of the maxim of pragmatism is the foundation for pragmatism (James, 1907, 23). He sees this as primarily "a method for settling metaphysical disputes": "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?" (Ibid, 23)

James acknowledges the double meaning of the word *pragmatism*. It has come to be used to refer to a certain theory of truth, but also to a certain attitude. The theory of truth is derived from the pragmatist method and sees truth as a process that is anchored in the concrete difference its being true makes in actual lives (Ibid., 88–9). However, here we concentrate on James' other dimension of pragmatism, where it is seen as a "familiar attitude in philosophy" that "does not stand for any special results. It is a method only." (Ibid., 25.) Different pragmatists can very well arrive at different conclusions—one can be an atheist and another kneel down and

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<sup>2</sup> Peirce is not in these two quotes strictly talking about himself but about experimentalist scientists in general. However, he makes it clear in the text that he as the writer "exemplifies the experimentalist type" (Peirce, 1905b, p. 332).

pray (Ibid., 27)—but what unites them is a certain “attitude of orientation” that James famously defines as follows: “The attitude of *looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts*” (James, 1907, 27).

This attitude is contrasted with the attitude of rationalism against which “pragmatism is fully armed and militant” (Ibid., 26). Rationalism seeks final truths, absolutes, and certainties upon which one can rest and that end one’s metaphysical quest. Pragmatism, in contrast, “unstiffens all our theories”, treats them as instruments that are used for certain purposes and that are always open to be molded in the future (Ibid., 26). Pragmatism as an attitude for James is an attitude that denounces all “supposed necessities” (Ibid., 27), accepts the contingency of stream of experiencing, and instead anchors the value of theories, ideas and concepts to their practical bearings in human life.

As regards Dewey, the most explicit discussion about the nature of pragmatism takes place in his article *What does pragmatism mean by practical* (1908), where he takes issue with William James’ (1907) above-discussed book on pragmatism. Dewey acknowledges the dualism inherent in James: James speaks of pragmatism both as a “temper of mind [and] an attitude” but also as a certain theory of truth (Dewey, 1908, 85). Dewey himself decides to “regard pragmatism as primarily a method” treating different theories of truth and reality as more or less incidental outcomes of this method (Ibid., 86). Dewey emphasizes that whatever theories one comes to hold, the key is to have the right attitude towards these theories: “treating conceptions, theories, etc. as working hypotheses” (Ibid., 86). In other words, “pragmatism as attitude represents what Mr. Peirce has happily termed the ‘laboratory habit of mind’ extended into every area where inquiry may fruitfully be carried on” (Ibid., 86). For Dewey, the attitude underlying pragmatism is thus about giving up the hope of finding anything “absolutely permanent, true, and complete” (Ibid., 87), instead remaining always open to change the tools of one’s thinking—concepts, theories and so forth—to accommodate for the experiential requirements of living.

In conclusion, while Peirce is explicit about associating pragmatism with its theory of meaning, he nevertheless admits that certain attitudes underlie this theory and are necessary for the acceptance of the theory. James, in turn, acknowledges that there are two ways to understand pragmatism: “first, a method, and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth” (James, 1907, 32). Dewey acknowledges also this dualism, but is explicit about treating the attitude or method of inquiry as primary in pragmatism.

### 3. Schiller's pragmatist humanism

In discussing the doctrines behind his version of pragmatism Peirce claims that "they are included as a part of the pragmatism of Schiller" (Peirce, 1905b, 335), whom he sees as an "admirably clear and brilliant thinker" (Ibid, 334). Peirce also talks approvingly of the way Schiller used the term pragmatism in the essay *Axioms as Postulates*, which Peirce views as a "most remarkable paper" (Ibid, 334)<sup>3</sup>. Despite their surface differences, Peirce and Schiller thus seem to share some basic ways of thinking that unite them. Furthermore, William James, in his preface to *Pragmatism*, recommends for the reader interested in pragmatism Schiller's writings: "Probably the best statements to begin with, however, are F. C. S. Schiller's in his *Studies in Humanism*" (James, 1907, 3). These approving remarks by Peirce and James makes it important to also investigate what Schiller had to say about pragmatism that was so much liked by both writers.

Schiller's version of pragmatism in *The definition of pragmatism and humanism* (1907) starts with an analysis of truth: when an assertion claims truth, "its consequences are always used to test its claim" and these consequences "must be consequences to some one for some purpose" (Ibid., 5). However, it soon expands into a broader analysis of the human condition where it is claimed that "all mental life is purposive" (Ibid.,10) and *actual knowing* is always permeated with interests, purposes, desires and emotions (Ibid.,11). "Human reason is ever gloriously human", as Schiller (Ibid., 11) plainly puts it. However, "this or that formulation" of pragmatism is not as important as the *spirit* behind these claims, which is a "bigger thing" and which Schiller denominates as *Humanism* (Ibid, 12).

Humanism, for Schiller is the simplest of philosophic standpoints: It "is merely the perception that the philosophic problem concerns human beings striving to comprehend a world of human experience by the resources of human minds" (Schiller, 1907, 12).

In other words, Schiller claims that as human beings we are always embedded within human experiencing and thus our philosophical inquiry also has to take place within and is constrained by this experiencing. Schiller sees this as an "obvious truism", because "if man may not presume his own nature in his reasonings about his experience, wherewith, pray, shall he reason?" (Ibid, 12). Humanism is thus just the claim that

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Schiller, Peirce even states that Schiller's philosophy is "at any rate in its conclusions nearer my own than does any other man's." (12 May 1905, quoted in Pietari-nen, 2011)

there is no escape for humans from their human condition and thus it must be taken into account in what man may be capable of doing through inquiry. In the end, it is this humanistic spirit that is most fundamental for Schiller as pragmatism as a theory is just "a special application of Humanism to the theory of knowledge" (Ibid, 16). In another text he notes that this kind of *humanism* is an "attitude of thought", which he knows "to be habitual" in both his own and in William James's thinking (Schiller, 1903, xvi), thus emphasizing that it is precisely an underlying attitude for philosophical inquiry rather than a polished theory that he shares with the other pragmatists.

#### 4. Pragmatist attitude as a way to understand the nature of human inquiry

Based on the above remarks we can generalize that pragmatism is a way of approaching philosophical questions that can be applied to any area of philosophical inquiry. It is first and foremost a method and only secondarily a theory. And what seems to make an inquiry pragmatist is its forward-looking nature and its denouncement of any absolutes and givens. This focus on beliefs, theories and concepts as tools guiding actions rather than something objective and given is what seems to unite all four pragmatists discussed above. Pragmatists come to emphasize human inquiry as a process that takes place within actual living and thus is always constrained by the human condition. Accordingly, perhaps the best modern definition of this attitude is made by Richard Bernstein who characterizes pragmatism as follows: "A nonfoundational, self-corrective conception of human inquiry based upon an understanding of how human agents are formed by, and actively participate in shaping, normative social practices" (Bernstein, 2010, x).

Pragmatism as an attitude is thus a way of conducting philosophical inquiry that emphasizes its ongoing, ever-evolving nature. As an attitude of inquiry, pragmatism seems to have two essential characters. First is the attitude of *fallibilism*, according to which "we cannot in any way reach perfect certitude nor exactitude. We never can be absolutely sure of anything" (CP 1.147, c. 1897). Instead, our knowledge "swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy" (CP 1.171, c. 1897). James picks up this theme in talking how pragmatism is opposed to any kind of "divine necessity" and thus "unstiffens all our theories" (James, 1907, 28, 26) and Dewey emphasizes how pragmatism as a method treats

conceptions and theories "as working hypotheses" (Dewey, 1908, 86). Similarly, Schiller emphasizes how all actual knowing must be understood as instrumental instead of believing it ever to be 'pure' or 'absolute' (Schiller, 1907, 11). This abandonment of the search for absolute knowledge and final truths is thus what all four pragmatists seem to be firmly committed to.

The centrality of fallibilism is also visible when we look at what doctrines pragmatism is set against. James sees as its primary enemy *rationalism*, which seeks to find "objective truth", or an "absolute correspondence of our thoughts with an equally absolute reality" (James, 1907, 32). From thinkers in search for absolutes, pragmatists have suffered "a hailstorm of contempt and ridicule" (Ibid, 32). Dewey points out that this heated resistance might be due to basic differences in philosophical temperament rather than mere disagreement about doctrines<sup>4</sup>. Pragmatism is a threat to those who have "the feeling that the world of experience is so unstable, mistaken, and fragmentary that it must have an absolutely permanent, true, and complete ground" (Dewey, 1908, 87). Schiller also contrasts his pragmatism with those who "dream of a truth that shall be absolutely true, self-testing and self-dependent, icily exercising an unrestricted sway over a submissive world" (Schiller, 1907, 9). More generally, the start of pragmatism as a philosophical movement has been located to this radical critique of the "spirit of Cartesianism" which is dominated by a search for indubitable foundations in a world where there are sharp dichotomies between mental and physical, and subject and object (Bernstein, 2010, IX). According to Bernstein, Peirce started a "fundamental change of philosophical orientation" with his attack on Cartesianism, in which philosophy attempts to secure and make objective its foundations by starting from something that is absolute and that we can be certain about (Bernstein, 2010, 19; see especially Peirce, 1868). So all four pragmatists seem to agree that all our convictions are "plastic", "even the oldest truths" (James, 1907, 31).

The second basic attitude underlying pragmatist inquiry is related to the aims of inquiry, given that it can no longer end in absolute certainty. Pragmatists anchor the value of inquiry into its prospective ability to influence the conduct of life. This is visible in Peirce's maxim of pragmatism where the rational purport of a word "lies exclusively in its conceivable

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<sup>4</sup> Schiller makes essentially the same point in stating that the dislike that pragmatism and humanism have met is "psychological in origin", arising from "ascetics of the intellectual world", "who have become too enamoured of the artificial simplifications" (Schiller, 1907, 14).

bearing upon the conduct of life" (Peirce, 1905b, 332). It is also at the heart of James' famous definition of pragmatism as the attitude of looking towards last things, fruits, and consequences. Dewey echoes the same idea in stating that "ideas are essentially intentions (plans and methods), and [...] what they, as ideas, ultimately intend is *prospective*" (Dewey, 1908, 86), and Schiller captures the same spirit in stating that "the meaning of a rule lies in its application" and that knowing is always purposive (Schiller, 1907, 11). Although much could be said about the differences in the exact definitions and ways these pragmatists aim to anchor the value of knowledge to future actions, the spirit of future-orientedness and pragmatic value of knowledge is strongly present in all. Thus Peirce seems to be right when he stated that all pragmatists will agree that their method is no other than the "experimental method" of sciences, which itself is but a particular application of the older logical rule: "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Peirce, 1907, 401).

Pragmatism as an attitude for inquiry thus seems to be essentially about the suspicion against any absolute and necessary principles that would be more basic than our human experience, and the forward-looking characteristic of pragmatist thinking that looks primarily at the consequences. This is the attitude that pragmatists see that could—and should—be applied to a wide number of questions, in fact "into every area where inquiry may fruitfully be carried on" (Dewey, 1908, 86), and "to every concern of man" (Schiller, 1907, 16). As the history of pragmatism has shown, this attitude could lead to highly different *conclusions* and *theories* as regards even basic questions about the nature of reality, but what unites different pragmatists seem to be the way they approach these questions. Pragmatism attitude thus can be summarized as consisting of "an attitude of orientation that looks to outcomes and consequences" (Dewey, 1908, 85) and an "idea about ideas" as tools (Menand, 2001, xi).

## 5. Human condition for Pragmatists

To truly appreciate the attitude behind pragmatism and pragmatist inquiry, I feel that we still need to take one further step backwards. I see that the attitudes described above are themselves based on a certain underlying understanding of the human condition that the pragmatists share. The birth of pragmatism can be traced back to the shift of western worldview from medieval way of seeing the world as a static and stable constellation, towards an attitude that sees the world and humanity in progressive

movement. Dewey acknowledges that this sort of worldview is behind the birth and success of pragmatism: "It is beyond doubt that the progressive and unstable character of American life and civilization has facilitated the birth of 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, 1925, 12). Accordingly, we need to look more carefully into how pragmatists come to understand the human condition within which the pragmatist inquiry takes place.

In particular, I will concentrate on three essential characteristics of human condition that pragmatism seems to presuppose. In calling these characteristics attitudes, rather than theories or beliefs, I am drawing attention to the fact that these beliefs are what we find at the beginning of the philosophical journey of a pragmatist. They are not the results of a rigorous philosophical inquiry, but rather the backbones supporting such inquiry. They are, to use James' words, the "more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means" that we have acquired through living; they are our "individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos" (James, 1907, 5). In other words, they are what constitutes a certain way of approaching the world in a philosophical manner or the intellectual conditions through which one's philosophical inquiry is made. Therefore, it is not my task to try to prove these attitudes here<sup>5</sup>, as they are the very attitudes through which one judges certain philosophical positions as good or bad in the first place (see here Pihlström, 1996, 393). The aim is rather to become more conscious about them, and through that act of reflection, to start taking greater responsibility (see Dewey, 1908, 97) for them.

### 5.1 Human experiencing as the starting point

We are embedded within a stream of experiencing. Taking this statement seriously is what I see to be at the heart of the pragmatist attitude or *Weltanschauung*. James speaks of "stream of experience" or the "flux

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<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that these attitudes would be completely arbitrary. I see these attitudes as fruitful from both a philosophical and extra-philosophical point of view (and superior to many other attitudes in this regard). But showing this to be the case would require a lengthy discussion. From a philosophical point of view, the attitudes are shown to be sound by looking at the soundness of the philosophical systems and theories built upon them. So this would require a comparison of the pragmatist tradition as a whole against some other philosophical traditions. From an extra-philosophical point of view (see here Zackariasson, 2002, 75), this would require showing that these attitudes lead to better outcomes in the actual human conduct than some other attitudes, also an enormous task.

of our sensations" (James, 1907, 66, 107) as the place within which our inquiry takes place and towards which it aims to contribute. We can never escape this stream of experiences; to be alive means to experience. As human beings we are bound by the human condition, which means that all we ever have are our particular experiences.

How should we understand human experiencing then? Building on Dewey (1917), we might say that "experience is primarily a process of undergoing" (Dewey, 1917, 49); it is a temporal and ever-evolving stream. Dewey emphasizes that as long as we treat it as "primarily a knowledge-affair" (Dewey, 1917, 47); a mere passive setting in which the world is reflected in front of us like a movie, and we merely sit and acquire knowledge from it, we are not really capturing what human experiencing is alike. Instead, we should understand that human experiencing is about "the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment" (Dewey, 1917, 47). As living beings, our relation to the stream of experience is essentially active. Hence, I prefer to talk about human *experiencing*, not human *experience*. This makes it more visible that experiencing is an active process.

Schiller, in his humanism, emphasizes that this experiencing is the only starting point that human inquiry can have: "The only natural starting-point, from which we can proceed in every direction" is the "world of man's experience as it has come to seem to him" (Schiller, 1903, xvii). For him, this is a "philosophic attitude" that takes "human experience as the clue to the world of human experience" rather than "wasting thought upon attempts to construct experience *a priori*" (Schiller, 1903, xix-xx).

Even Peirce seems to think approvingly of this experiential starting point behind pragmatism. In a letter to James in 1904 Peirce wrote: "The humanistic element of pragmatism is very true and important and impressive"<sup>6</sup> (quoted in Houser, 1998, xxvii), and in a letter to Schiller Peirce acknowledged that pragmatism is only "a particular offshoot of humanism" and adds that it is the route through which he himself found pragmatism (Peirce MS L390 c. 1905). In another text he states that pragmatism is "a sort of instinctive attraction for living facts" (Peirce, 1903, 158). Fur-

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<sup>6</sup> Revealingly, the quote continues as follows: "but I do not think that the doctrine can be *proved* in that way." We are well aware of Peirce's efforts to prove his pragmatism (see e.g. Peirce 1907) and this might explain why Peirce didn't write so much about this humanism or experientialism. Even though he here clearly approves it, from his point of view it doesn't seem to be an area of pragmatism that he is interested in, as it doesn't offer the potential for a proof.

thermore, and as already noted, when Peirce discussed the background doctrines behind his pragmatism he made it clear that there is only state of mind from which one can set out: "the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do 'set out,'" which is already laden with an "immense mass of cognition already formed" (Peirce, 1905b, 336).

Thinking and philosophical inquiry must start from particular human experiencing, from the particular worldview that we are already occupying, because, in essence, that is something "of which you cannot divest yourself if you would" (Peirce, 1905b, 336). The ongoing stream of experiencing thus is the place where philosophical inquiry for a pragmatist starts from; our particular experiences are all the material we have upon which to start building anything. Human experiencing is also where the inquiry ends; it is our human experiencing that is transformed through our philosophical and other forms of activity. Experiencing itself must here be understood as an active process of exploration within an embodied stream of experience in which the more cognitive dimensions are just one part. Experiencing thus involves all forms of sensory and bodily sensations as well as all possible modes of thoughts and feelings. It includes our slightest wishes, recalled memories, dreams, as well as the feelings that arise when we read a particularly interesting philosophical article. Taking seriously human experiencing, and acknowledging it as an *inescapable* starting point for all philosophizing as well as for other human activities, is what could be named as the core of the pragmatist attitude. A philosopher who is able to appreciate this as the backbone of any inquiry is already more or less a pragmatist. And acknowledging this experiencing as the inescapable starting and end point of inquiry is already almost subscribing to the pragmatist attitudes of fallibilism and forward-looking nature of inquiry. Pragmatist attitude of inquiry thus could be seen to be arising from the pragmatist acknowledgement of the human condition as experiencing.

## 5.2 Three characteristics of human experiencing

A more careful look at this human experiencing reveals that embedded in our understanding of it are three elements that are essential for characterizing its nature: Firstly, we have a sense of influencing our future experiences. Secondly, we do care about the nature of these experiences; some of them are more desirable than others. And thirdly, our experiencing is not free but constrained.

Firstly then, our mode of being within the stream of experience is active. "All our thinking and all our living seem to overflow" with "the experience of activity" (Schiller, 1907, 11). We are not mere passive observers of life, but a sense of acting within it is always present. Peirce notes how this active relation to our actions is part of the background doctrines on which pragmatism is based on: "Among the things which the reader, as a rational person, does not doubt, is that he not merely has habits, but also can exert a measure of self-control over his future actions" (Peirce, 1905b, 337).

To put it boldly, as human beings we are thrown into a world in which we need to act; we are inescapably creatures of action. Dewey emphasizes that ours is an engaged organic life, in which we actively engage with "a universe of experience" (Dewey, 1938, 68). The stream of experience unstoppably unfolds around us, so even if we shut ourselves up in the most clam-like fashion, we are still doing something, "our passivity is an active attitude" (Dewey, 1917, 49). We are "obliged to struggle—that is to say, to employ the direct support given by the environment in order indirectly to effect changes that would not otherwise occur" (Dewey, 1917, 48). Enactors of our human condition, we never are neutral observers of the world but engaged in it from the very beginning. As Hans Joas has put it: "Action [...] is the way in which human beings exist in the world" (Joas, 1999).

Secondly, a certain sense of care for how our lives develop—for how the stream of experience is shaped in the future—seems to be something we must also regard as part of our human condition. Being active already presumes this kind of caring: "Action cannot exist without the immediate being of feeling on which to act" (Peirce, 1905b, 345). Without some form of interest in what happens, we would not have the necessary motivation to exercise our agency—or to engage in any inquiry in the first place. Peirce thus acknowledges the "inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose" (Peirce, 1905b, 333). When we recognize ideas as intentions (Dewey, 1908, 86) or emphasize their usefulness (James, 1907, 28), we are already assuming some human purposes that they serve. These interests and purposes color our experience of reality as essentially normative; some developments we judge as good or bad based on our commitments. We don't live in complete indifference; if we would, this would make us entirely unable to act, because some forms of preferences—whether implicit or explicit—are a precondition for anything called *choice* or *acting* to take place. As human beings, we thus have a *sense of agency*

combined with a *care* about how things develop in our lives and in the world around us. "Experience, in other words, is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings" (Dewey, 1917, 49).

Inherent in the above conditions of human experiencing is already the third one, the fact that things develop independent of our conceptions of them. We don't have a total control of our experiencing, or even what we believe in. There is a certain "Outward Clash" that molds our conceptions of the world (see also Bernstein, 2010, 46; Peirce, 1885, 233). Peirce describes this part of the human condition as follows:

Experience is that determination of belief and cognition generally which the course of life has forced upon man. One may lie about it; but one cannot escape the fact that some things are forced upon his cognition. There is an element of brute force, existing whether you opine it exists or not

CP 2.138, c. 1902

James acknowledges this outward clash in describing how flux of our sensations are "forced upon us, coming we know not whence," and over which we seem not to have too much control (James, 1907, 107).

An essential element of the human condition thus seems to be this sense of brute force, sensations taking place that we can't control. In other words, our experiencing is not free, but constrained. As part of our experiencing is a "brute compulsiveness" (Bernstein, 2010, 52); we cannot help but experience certain things. Acknowledgement of this resistance to our projects and conceptions separates pragmatism from pure idealism. For example, Peirce regards as "the capital error of Hegel" the fact that "he almost altogether ignores the Outward Clash" (Peirce, 1885, 233).

The acknowledgement of this outward clash as part of human experiencing thus arguably unites different pragmatists. What they make out of it, however, is one of the main separating lines between, for example, Peirce and Schiller. Peirce was a self-proclaimed believer in scholastic realism (see especially Peirce, 1905a), while for Schiller, philosophy is always "the theory of *a* life, and not of life in general", and accordingly the metaphysics for two men with different fortunes and histories ought to be different and based on what their "personal life affords" (Schiller, 1907, 18). This is something that Peirce opposed. One of the main reasons for him to introduce the concept of *pragmaticism* was to separate it from the pragmatism of James and Schiller, which he saw to imply "'the will to believe,' the mutability of truth, the soundness of Zeno's refutation of motion, and pluralism generally" (Peirce, 1911, 457).

We cannot here go deeper into this ontological debate about the merits of different doctrines about the nature of reality in pragmatism (for a discussion about them, see e.g. Pihlström, 1996). However, two general points can be made: First, pragmatist emphasis on experiencing does not automatically imply solipsism or pure idealism. Peirce saw realism to be a direct consequence of his pragmatism (Peirce, 1905a). When different investigators apply the pragmatic method of fixing beliefs through experiences “a force outside of themselves” leads them towards “one and the same conclusion”, and the “object represented in this opinion” is what is real (Peirce, 1878, 138–139). Dewey also couldn’t understand why pragmatism is accused of subjectivism or idealism, “since the object with its power to produce effects is assumed” (Dewey, 1908, 88). Rather than being opposed to realism, (at least certain) pragmatists aim to go beyond the false dichotomy between realism and idealism by understanding even realism through experience and inquiry. But as said, here we can only notify this, but have not space to elaborate the issue (see Martela 2015).

Second, pragmatism can lead to different ontological conclusions: to Peirce’s realism, to Schiller’s quite solipsistic view (see Schiller, 1909)<sup>7</sup>, or even going “beyond realism and antirealism” as Dewey is said to have done (Hildebrand, 2003). But these conclusions are what we find at the end of inquiry. Reality for Peirce is not something we can base our investigation on; on the contrary what is real can only be found in the (ideal) *end of inquiry, through* inquiry. Thus we are reminded of James metaphor of pragmatism as a corridor through which everyone must pass before reaching widely different conclusions. And the corridor seems to be about the acknowledgement of human experiencing as the starting point.

I have thus argued that the human condition inherent in pragmatism acknowledges that our way of experiencing involves sense of activity, purposefulness and resistance. Taken together, these three dimensions of our relation to experience amount to an understanding that the human condition means an active interest in developing the stream of experience in certain directions. Our primary interest as regards the world is about attempting to navigate our way within it’s constraints as best as we can. Taking seriously human interest (e.g. Schiller, 1907, 5)—the fact that as hu-

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<sup>7</sup> In his article “Solipsism”, Schiller aims to argue that it is almost impossible to escape solipsism and many who consider themselves realists stand on solipsistic ground. However, humanism can easily refute solipsism: “He is not a solipsist, because he chooses to believe in the existence of others” as this is found out to be a useful belief (Shiller, 1909, 180), an argument that no doubt wouldn’t satisfy many realists.

man beings we are interested in and attempt to influence the unfolding of the stream of experience—is really what makes pragmatism *pragmatism*. As James (1907, 23) notes, the term is derived from Greek *πρᾶγμα*, “meaning action, from which our words ‘practice’ and ‘practical’ come.” Anchoring human life, human inquiries, and even philosophy itself, to human purposes while acknowledging the fallibilism of these inquiries is thus the pervasive attitude of pragmatism. In other words, pragmatism claims that our relation to the world is primarily practical rather than theoretical. As Putnam (1994 152) notes, this thesis that “in a certain sense, practice is primary in philosophy”, is one of the theses which “became the basis of the philosophies of Peirce, and above all of James and Dewey.” And as I have tried to argue, this thesis arises from a certain background understanding of the human condition. Accordingly, pragmatism as a theory or mode of inquiry appeals mainly to those who have come to embrace this kind of *Weltanschauung*, while being unattractive to others who want to escape from the messiness of actual living, into a more static, rigid and ‘pure’ worldview. As Sami Pihlström puts it: “To philosophers who are not at all interested in the contingent fact that we happen to be humans existing in irreducibly human situations, located in a human world, the pragmatist does not have very much to say” (Pihlström, 1996, 17).

## 6. Conclusion

What I have offered in this article is an understanding of pragmatism that emphasizes the underlying sense of us as creatures of action embedded in a constant stream of experiencing. The appreciation of the active nature of the human condition here is an attitude; a way of approaching philosophical questions, other forms of inquiry, as well as our life more generally. It is an attitude, or habit of thought, through which to grasp reality, and what it means to be a human agent in this reality. This pragmatist understanding of human condition starts from an emphasis on experiencing that is understood to be active, involve valuing and purposes, and constrained by an outward clash. From this background arises the understanding of human inquiry that has two essential characteristics that lie at the very heart of the pragmatist attitude. First, inquiry is always fallible and unable to reach perfect certitude or absolute knowledge. Second, inquiry is future-oriented, it is judged by its fruits.

I suggest that it is this *attitude* that unites different pragmatists more than any explicit *theoretical doctrine*. However, in saying this I do not deny

that many pragmatists clearly connect pragmatism with a certain doctrine, in particular with Peirce's maxim of pragmatism. Along with James and Dewey I acknowledge that there are (at least) two different ways to understand pragmatism. One can either associate it with a certain doctrine or theory (of meaning or truth), or one can look at it more broadly as a certain kind of attitude. In this article I simply have wanted to concentrate on the latter understanding of pragmatism, aiming to figure out what kind of attitude would unite pragmatists, in particular Peirce, James, Dewey and Schiller.

In the end, the question of whether one wants to associate pragmatism with its underlying attitudes, or with the more strictly defined methods or theories to be applied in one's inquiry, is a matter of preference. For someone with the Peircean wish for "philosophy to be a strict science, passionless and severely fair" (CP 5.537, c. 1905), it is surely more easily acceptable to take something exact and explicitly stated as the point of reference for one's philosophical identity. For someone who has a more holistic view of philosophy as embodying the whole of human being, it might be more natural to associate oneself with the underlying attitudes. It is notable that both might sign to the same basic attitudes, the difference being only in the fact that one of them is anchoring his or her philosophical position to these attitudes, while the other identifies with some more explicit theories that are built upon them. This choice might be a matter of philosophical temperament, but the least we can say is that conceiving pragmatism to be about committing to certain attitudes is a genuine possibility—especially as these attitudes seem to operate as the background upon which the more explicit theories are built on.

Staying true to this fallible pragmatist attitude throughout one's philosophical journey is certainly not an easy task. It is so much easier to start the philosophical inquiry from an established framework of given premises and accepted ways of proceeding. Starting from some solid ground—from something that is Given—means that one can in the best case reach conclusions that have the same sense of firmness. But the path from an indeterminate situation to more determinate, yet fallible, pieces of knowledge is much harder to walk (see Dewey, 1938). This *more humane* approach to philosophy may not be as exact, analytic or confident as the more idealized way of doing philosophy. But I see it to be a more honest way of doing philosophy, and less an intellectual escape from the particularities of human life. It means embracing the uncertainty and still advancing, animated by the hope that one has the possibility to make

a difference through one's thinking; to cultivate the map that is one's way of navigating through the grand experience that is called life.<sup>8</sup>

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Can pragmatism ever be understood as a claim in light of its own conditions? Ask Question. Asked 3 years, 5 months ago.Â Sorry for not getting back to you sooner. The short version of my answer is something like: to me Pragmatism is more like an attitude or orientation than a claim. If it were a claim along the lines of a definition of truth or reference in terms of practices then it would be circular as you note. But pragmatists do not (usually) presume to define truth and reference (i.e. what they are); rather they tend to explain the way we use those terms, and then (usually) argue that looking for more than that is a waste of time.