

What Do Pragmatists Look Like?

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September 2023

A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.

—Max Planck

I've never understood the complex philosophical theory of pragmatism beyond William James saying religion is useful because it consoles. What's pragmatism? Its name suggests it should be a simple idea: if it were that hard to understand, how could it be useful?

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It's easier to see what pragmatism is by looking at what it isn't. The opposite of pragmatism is religion. It isn't just the narrowly defined religion, but more generally, holding any belief with absolute certainty, followed by fanaticism and intolerance of disagreements. Common examples: ideologies, dogmas, and big theories¹.

¹ Especially big theories in humanity and soft science.

Why do we have dogmatic beliefs? (1) Most importantly, believing *feels good*; doubts give mental pain, so you tend to avoid them. (2) Human brains love simplifying to reduce the mental workload;² once you've formed a belief, you're tempted to mold the world to fit into it, like the old saying "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." (3) You're emotionally attached to your beliefs as if they were a part of you, so challenging them hurts your ego: "Those are *my* beliefs; criticizing them is attacking *me* personally."

² That's why religious people love reducing everything to "xxx-ism" and labeling people as "xxx-ist."

As a result, after you've held a belief for a while, it's almost impossible to undo it because the *force of mental habits* is too strong. Planck said that even science, which is supposed to be the most open-minded, advances only one funeral at a time; everything else is much worse.

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But certain skeptical and independent-minded people, namely *pragmatists*, refuse to believe something *merely* because it feels good to do so. They won't accept an idea until they've seen enough evidence – no

matter how good they would feel if it were believed. So pragmatists don't distort the world to fit into their beliefs; instead, they look at what the impersonal *facts* are and what the facts tell them.³ Most importantly, pragmatists have the mental capacity to endure the pain of confronting their existing beliefs, no matter how firmly held, and destroy them if necessary. It's, of course, painful, but they care more about knowing what's right than feeling good.

³ Pragmatists develop immunity to rhetoric selling based on evoking emotions. They know emotions might impact an event in the short run; but in the long run, only facts will determine its outcome. Emotions wouldn't move them; facts would.

Pragmatists also criticize their own ideas ruthlessly as if they were criticizing other people's ideas.⁴ You're naturally attached to your own ideas because you've spent (lots of) effort on them and it's tempting to believe they *should* work to justify your effort. You also often need to sell your ideas, so you have incentives to exaggerate their virtues and hide their vices. Once you've preached anything repeatedly for long enough, you would *fool yourself* into believing it. Pragmatists, however, wouldn't believe an idea is right *merely* because it's theirs. They suppress their *self-sympathy*, *wishful thinking*, and *hidden incentive* because what matters eventually is *what's* right, not *who's* right.

⁴ Or even better, their opponent's ideas.

We have the first and most important description of pragmatists: they don't fool themselves into believing something merely because it feels good to do so. Instead, they look at the facts.

Where do facts come from? Only one place: the *real world*.

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Pragmatists observe facts from the real world because facts give them *confidence*. They also use facts to judge their own ideas – regardless of what others or they themselves *wish* to believe. Pragmatists are *doers*, not talkers. They hate disputes; they would rather do real work and use facts to prove they're right.

What defines pragmatists is they know *what works* in reality. What do we mean by “what works”? Useful things, especially ideas, in the real world. But what do we mean by “useful”? Well, we're reaching the limit of words.⁵ Nevertheless, what works is like what Justice Stewart said about hard-core porn: it's hard to define it precisely; but you would know it when you see it. However, unlike hard-core porn, you can have a good sense only if you constantly think about what works and what doesn't work.

⁵ If we go further, we would get into Wittgensteinian territory; so we'd better stop here.

If we still want a *rough* definition: what works will get rid of *bad* pain in the *real world* in the *long run*; what doesn't work will increase them.

How can pragmatists figure out what works in the real world? Only one way: by *trying*.

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Trying in the real world doesn't mean simply indulging in what Keynes called *animal spirits*, i.e. human's craving for actions. Pragmatists don't try randomly; they try thoughtfully with principles. They only act when they're reasonably confident and only do what they think is likely to work, supported by facts and reasoning.

They know they'll make mistakes, and they'll be humbled by the real world.⁶ If you don't learn from your mistakes, you're a hopeless fool. If you only learn hard lessons from your own mistakes, you're a hopeful fool but still a fool. Pragmatists know they need to learn from both themselves and others, both directly and indirectly. They try to maximize the *lesson-to-cost* ratio.

⁶ Pragmatists aren't afraid of admitting they're wrong if it's what the facts are telling them. They keep their ego small in front of truth because, again, what matters ultimately is knowing *what's* right, not proving *they're* right.

They *reflect*. They constantly *ask themselves*: "What works? Why? What doesn't work? Why?" The "Why"s are important because (1) it's hard to know why something happened; we're good at making up random reasons that we can't verify and (2) it's tempting to *rationalize*. So pragmatists need to make sure the reasons are sound and not self-deceiving.

They *introspect*. They periodically ask themselves: What mistakes did I make? What has caused them in my thinking and actions? What did I do that worked well? How can I use it more often in the future? Am I working on what I should be? Am I on the right path? Should I keep trying or give up? Am I good at this? Do I suck at that? They're *honest* with themselves because that's how they can improve.

How can pragmatists figure out what works when most people can't? By *thinking on it continually*. They hold problems in their head day and night, starting the thoughts when eyes open, carrying them into sleep, and *incubating* them in dreams. They keep wrestling with problems until they can finally see a few insights.

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Pragmatists, however, don't merely live in their own mental worlds. Unlike pure theoreticians, pragmatists want what they *do* to be *useful* in the real world. They dislike a fancy theory that sounds nice but has only one problem: it doesn't work in the real world.

They're careful about generalizing knowledge. They know that, unlike the neat theoretical world, the real world is complex, messy, and full of subtle details, making real-world knowledge fragile. The craving for *easy* generalizations has caused far more errors than looking at individual problems case by case. So pragmatists know they'd better learn and understand the specific circumstances, and then do what the *circumstances* demand, because it's how the real world works.

Pragmatists know that most questions in the real world are *too hard*. They *suspend their judgments* if they aren't sure because it's better to not have answers than to have wrong answers. And it's better to be confused when they should be than to be absolutely certain that they know what's going on. Easy speculation is fun but will cause lots of mistakes, follies, and harms.

Pragmatists are peculiar. They aren't like people full of animal spirits who just try things randomly; they aren't like theoreticians who ignore the complexity of the real world either. They're practical theoreticians or theoretical practitioners. They're worldly philosophers.

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The real world is full of complex *tradeoffs*. Very, very often, you have no solution, only tradeoffs to make between choices. But pragmatists don't fear tradeoffs because it's better to get vexed with making the choice than (1) having no choice at all,⁷ (2) not realizing what they would give up by making the choice,⁸ and (3) not recognizing the risks associated with what they choose.⁹

To make a judgment, pragmatists need to see all sides. They don't allow one viewpoint to override all others. A few minor merits don't compensate for all the vices; a few minor flaws don't nullify all the virtues. They love saying "All things considered," "Averaged out," "The net effect is," and hate hearing "Other things being equal" (because they aren't) and "If we have unlimited resources" (because we don't).

When they make decisions, they often say: "It's safer to err too much on the side of *X* than its opposite." and "We have to take the lesser of two evils – even though it's disgusting – because the alternative is worse; we have to take the greater of two goods – even though the alternative feels itchy – because we can only choose one."

Because real-world problems are complex and human understanding is limited, one-sided arguments can *seem* to be right easily. Then,

⁷ i.e. "burning-the-boat" situation, which is overrated by survival bias.

⁸ i.e. not thinking of the opportunity cost.

⁹ i.e. after choosing *X*, seeing *X* as perfect in every way because admitting the downside in *X* – even though it was the lesser of two evils at that time – is unpleasant.

with rhetoric ingredients that make them emotionally appealing, people can implant biased “reasoning” into your head stealthily. Pragmatists, however, don’t allow themselves to have a strong view unless they’ve considered other arguments to the extent that they could argue against their own position as well as their opponents do. They can hold the view only, after internal debates, all things considered, they still think they’re likely to be right.

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The real world is full of noise but too little signal. Most people simply do whatever things that come to them without thinking about whether what they’re doing is important or not. But pragmatists are good at distinguishing what’s essential from what’s inessential.

When picking what to work on, pragmatists have a good sense of how important a problem is. Perhaps it’s because they’re ambitious: they don’t want what they’ll work on to have no chance of becoming great.

Pragmatists may vary in how much detail they want to master, but they all insist on knowing the high-level direction well because they know choosing the right direction is *far, far* more rewarding than working a little harder. In fact, when you’re on the wrong track, you would be better off if you were lazier and stupider.

Pragmatists can see through the complexity of the real world and identify the essence of a problem. How do they do it? By *common sense*. Common sense, paradoxically, is uncommon; few people have it. What do we mean by common sense? The ability to point out simple and obvious truths, both in what’s wrong and what’s right. When we’re doing what’s obviously wrong, pragmatists can catch it, and we might shout: “How could I be so stupid?” When we get lost in details, pragmatists can point out what’s clearly right, and we might yell: “It’s so simple. How did I not see it myself?”

But it’s because pragmatists *make* it look simple; it’s the result of their habit of continuous thinking. They’ve frequently gone through the same process *on themselves* that others experience, i.e. “How could I be so stupid?” and “It’s so simple. How did I not see it earlier?”

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Pragmatists know the real world has no easy answers to complex questions. People wish to hear about easy and quick solutions because it

feels good¹⁰ and they're impatient. But you can't write down general instructions on how to figure out what works.

So pragmatists have to figure out what works for *them* specifically because everyone¹¹ has different circumstances. How to find out what works for you specifically? Again, only by trying yourself; no one else can do it for you. You wish someone¹² could tell you what to do *exactly*. But nobody could figure out what works for you better than yourself because *only* you know your circumstances the best.¹³

Pragmatists also hate to be told what works.¹⁴ They want to figure it out by themselves because they'll understand it better that way. And they *love* figuring out by themselves because they're *curious* about what works and what doesn't work in the real world. They're like kids, and the real world is the place to play around with different ideas.

It means pragmatists have lots of self-knowledge; they know their strengths and weaknesses well. They always try to use their strengths and avoid using their weaknesses because it's, of course, what works for them.

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Pragmatists are keen observers of human nature since it's what makes the real world complex, and it's the key to understanding what works and what doesn't work. They're likely to be lovers of history because it's what we know about human nature so far. They know humans keep making the same mistakes again and again: "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

They might weep at human folly, but they're more likely to laugh at it. They have a sense of humor because they see the real world accurately and it's absurd. They're also good at laughing at themselves because it helps them see their own weaknesses. And, why not? It's fun.

But pragmatists never resent human nature because it doesn't work: it won't change people; it'll only hurt themselves, i.e. increasing bad pain. They know humans are bound to all kinds of flaws. This is a *fact*. They *must* accept it. Almost nothing is more counterproductive than resenting human nature.

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Pragmatists are greedy in searching for what works. They don't want

¹⁰ That's why self-help books sell.

¹¹ Including a company, a country, and a civilization etc.

¹² e.g. in ancient time: sages, prophets, astrologers, fortune-tellers, or God; in our time: expensive advisors; in both times: old people.

¹³ It makes no sense to believe others can give you magical advice by only spending a little time with you and only knowing a few (stereotypical) things about you. They might give better advice if (1) you rarely think about it yourself, (2) experience really matters, or (3) it sometimes looks clearer from an outsider's viewpoint. But averaged out, we rely on external advice too much and think ourselves too little.

¹⁴ Especially what works for them.

the bias from their time and place to restrict them. They're eager to find out what works – regardless of whether it's from ancient or modern times, from their birth or foreign places, or from anyone.¹⁵

They're also interested in the intersection between ideas from different sources. If an idea is repeatedly mentioned by many great people – ancient or modern, native or foreign – then it's likely to be right. "If it's trite, it's right," as Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger said. All wise, noble, and happy people are alike; each foolish, vulgar, and bitter person is stupid, wicked, and miserable in their own unique way.

But pragmatists learn from others only what works, and discard what doesn't work. They wouldn't copy lazily without judging if it's a virtue or a vice.¹⁶ They admire, but they don't blindly follow.¹⁷

If pragmatists have only one dogmatic belief, it's: *Whatever works, is right.*

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Merely knowing what works isn't enough; what works means nothing to you until you've *done* it repeatedly and the benefits have *compounded* for long enough. What works is usually something simple and obvious, but why can only a few do it *consistently*? It's because sticking to what works needs *discipline*. You'll feel bored of doing the same thing again and again even if you know it's what's been working for you. You're tempted, by animal spirits, to try what's new and bizarre because it looks fun and sexy. You break the compounding yourself.

But pragmatists don't look for what's complex or bizarre; they stick to what's simple and obvious. They *keep doing what works* while others switch back and forth between what works and what doesn't work.¹⁸

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No matter how much you long for certainty, predictability, and eternity, the real world is uncertain, unpredictable, and forever-changing. Pragmatists know when the world changes, *they* must change.¹⁹ What's been working for them for a while can stop working. Those beloved ideas that they had figured out through hard work, with sweat, tears, and joy, can start to work less well or even don't work anymore. It's perhaps the saddest moment for them.

But pragmatists will *talk to* themselves to overcome the mental pain

¹⁵ Including their opponents – especially opponents because they know you the best.

¹⁶ We're tempted to learn from others the vices rather than the virtues because vices look fun and sexy and are easier to copy.

¹⁷ They hate seeing people mindlessly copying something without thinking if it fits the specific circumstances or not, and even worse, preaching it fanatically.

¹⁸ It means pragmatists might have some unusual habits because once they've figured out what works for them, they want to stick to it. Why switch to something they don't know when they've known what works well for them?

¹⁹ It doesn't mean they change their mind every 5 minutes; they only do so when they've seen an overwhelming amount of facts.

and recognize the reality because it's how the real world works. They ask themselves the question demanded by Keynes, "When new facts come in, I changed my mind. What do *you* do?"

It means pragmatists must *learn* continuously in their whole life, even at old age. And they enjoy learning, including the painful part of it. When they're young, they might look more mature than their peers; when they grow old, they look rather more youthful than what they actually are. As Ben Franklin, the great pragmatist, said: "An old young man will be a young old man."

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Pragmatism is both simple and complex. It's simple because the idea is simple: just finding out what works for you in the real world by trying and thinking. It's complex because the real world is complex: you can't have easy ways that tell you what works for you, what doesn't work for you, and what you should do exactly.

Pragmatism isn't unique in that way; useful ideas in the real world often don't tell you what's *exactly* right. Instead, they tell you what's *wrong* and what's *roughly* right. For example, you might not like Aristotle's *golden mean* because you can't determine the mean precisely. But it's useful to know you should avoid extremes. Though you can't hit the exact mean, you can estimate a rough range and *try* to stay within it.

Similarly, you can't calculate Ben Graham's *intrinsic value* of a stock precisely, but it's useful to know a stock's true value isn't what the market believes (i.e. its price). Instead, it's the value justified by facts that is independent of what the crowd wishes to believe. Though you can't calculate it after 10 decimal places, you can *try* to estimate a rough range, and buy or sell if the price falls out of the range.

Pragmatism is alike. It doesn't tell you exactly what'll work with absolute certainty, which doesn't exist in the real world. But it teaches you what to avoid, i.e. believing *only* what feels good and refusing to recognize reality. Self-deception doesn't work because it won't reduce bad pain in the real world; it'll only increase pain. The best you can do is to figure out what's *likely* to be right for you, by trying yourself and thinking continuously.

Great ideas like golden mean, intrinsic value, and pragmatism serve as your intellectual *framework*. Because the real world is complex, nothing can tell you what's precisely right and, therefore, what to do exactly.

That's why you might feel disappointed when you first hear about those ideas. But they point out *common human mistakes*, which is more valuable than knowing what's right because it's *far, far* more beneficial to avoid being stupid than to try to make yourself *look* smart.

Those great ideas are *honest*. They don't say what you wish to hear, i.e. what can be done *easily, quickly, and exactly*. They don't promise you a golden solution, as some people may want to sell you, because it doesn't exist in the real world. Instead, they give you *rough guidance*, and then it's left to *you* to figure out how to navigate through the complexity of the real world.

That's the best you can do in *this* world.

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In modern times, no better example can show the power of pragmatism than the Chinese economic reform. In China's late 1970s, shortly after Mao's death, Chinese people debated hugely between two ideas. One preached, "Whatever policies Mao supported, and whatever instructions Mao gave, should still be followed." You couldn't get more religious than that. The other was a manifesto of pragmatism: "Practice is the sole criterion for judging truth." Then, mostly because of Deng Xiaoping's support, the pragmatic idea won, and China started to reform.

Deng is known for his *Cat Theory*: "It doesn't matter if it's a black or white cat, as long as it can catch the mouse, it's a good cat." What does it mean? It means ideology isn't important: it doesn't matter if it's capitalism or socialism, as long as it can do good for people, it's a good system.²⁰

²⁰ But he couldn't say it directly in the political environment at that time.

I don't know if you can find a better example of pragmatist: a lifelong Marxist who had dedicated his entire life to the socialist revolution; but at old age, changed his mind and was *determined* to do the exact opposite of his belief, because he figured out it's what works in the real world? We all look like dogmatic priests compared to him.

And what did this pragmatism produce in the real world? A miracle in human history: never has a country that big gotten rid of material suffering that fast.

So it *works*.