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Pragmatism

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Abstract

Pragmatism is a school of thought popularized in the beginning of the twentieth century by American psychologist and philosopher William James. Although most widely known (and criticized) for its theory of truth, pragmatism is a far broader position, connecting to issues in psychology, education, ethics, religion, and politics. This entry gives an overview of pragmatism particularly as developed by James. It begins by describing pragmatism's historical development and presenting the pragmatist contribution to philosophical debates about truth. From this, the entry moves to discussing pragmatism's broader significance, and it does so by highlighting how pragmatism's emphasis on practical effects relates to cognitive and existential possibilities: Our habits both limit and enable the range of behaviors available to us, but they can also be worked on so as to bring us closer to better possibilities, including possibilities for our own personal development and for making life more meaningful, as well as possibilities for how we approach life in society.

Introduction

In a broad colloquial sense, the term "pragmatism" suggests an attitude of approaching problems without getting bogged down into abstract considerations and "idealistic" expectations: The pragmatic person has a down-to-earth, "realistic"

outlook and does what they can with what they have, knowing that, as the famous aphorism goes, perfect is the enemy of good. This ordinary connotation of "pragmatism" is certainly related to the technical meaning of the term in academic circles, but it is also relevantly different – as much as the "realism" and "idealism" mentioned above differ from their philosophical counterparts. As a school of thought, pragmatism is often described as the quintessential American philosophy, an approach that broke away from both the mainland European and the British traditions to forge a whole new way of addressing philosophical problems, solving some of them, and dissolving others. This entry presents some key themes in pragmatism, beginning with an overview of the pragmatist theory of truth and meaning, and then proceeding to articulating broadly construed "cognitive" and "existential" dimensions of pragmatist thought. Throughout, the entry will emphasize how pragmatist ideas relate to possibility, and, in light of this connection, it will conclude by clarifying how pragmatist philosophy differs from, and can enrich, "pragmatic" thinking in the colloquial sense just described. But, first, a brief historical sketch is in order.

Historical Background

Pragmatism was popularized by William James (1842–1910) in a collection of lectures published as a book in 1907 under the title *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. James credited his friend Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), and in particular Peirce's 1878 article "How to make our ideas clear," with having set up the conceptual foundations for pragmatism. Curiously, Peirce would dispute this claim, distancing himself from James' formulation and calling his own view "pragmaticism" instead (see Peirce 1905). The other canonical figure widely recognized as one of the so-called Classical American Pragmatists is John Dewey (1859–1952), whose 1903 book *Studies in Logical Theory* James cites alongside other articles (Dewey 1906a, b, c, 1907) as contributions to pragmatist thought (see also

► The Possible in the Life and Work of John Dewey). Besides Peirce and Dewey, James acknowledges Oxford philosopher F. C. S. Schiller (1864–1937; Schiller 1907) as well as members of the "Chicago School" led by Dewey, such as George Herbert Mead (1863–1931; Mead 1903; see also ► George Herbert Mead), as developing views relevantly similar to his own (James 1904, 1907). Other scholars contemporaneous with James who were linked to pragmatism outside of philosophy included American jurist and associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1872–1929; see Menand 2001), and sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B Du Bois (1868–1963; see Taylor 2004). Later philosophers influenced to varying degrees by the classical pragmatists include analytic pragmatists and neopragmatists such as C. I. Lewis (1883–1964), Willard van Orman Quine (1908–2000), Hilary Putnam (1926–2016), and Richard Rorty (1931–2007), as well as contemporary philosophers of very diverse orientations such as Robert Brandom, Susan Haack, Cornel West, and Jürgen Habermas, to mention just a few (see Legg and Hookway 2021).

Pragmatism enjoyed great popularity in the period immediately following James' lectures, in large part due to the amount of criticism its theory of truth attracted (more on this in the next section). This initial notoriety led to relative obscurity, up until pragmatism was rediscovered in mainstream academic philosophy in the past few decades. This history is well documented. Menand's Pulitzer Prize award-winning 2001 book *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* offers an engaging account of the historical political, cultural, and intellectual environment in which pragmatism emerged. Different aspects of pragmatism's later historical development appear in discussions by Schwartz (2012) and Misak (2016), while Shook and Margolis (2006) and Stuhr (2009) each offer rich collections of essays commemorating the centenary of James' book. Reflecting the more recently renewed interest in pragmatism, a number of general introductions have begun to crop up, including many excellent ones (see Wilshire 2000; Talisse and Aikin 2008; Bacon 2012; Spencer 2020), as well as

anthologies with primary sources from the classic to the contemporary (Menand 1997; Talisse and Aikin 2011). A topic of growing interest is pragmatism's relation to ideas outside philosophy, especially in the natural sciences: On this, see Trevor Pearce's (2020) *Pragmatism's Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy*, which traces pragmatism's biological roots (and branch and flower and fruit); another recent contribution worth mentioning is Crippen and Schulkin's (2020) *Mind Ecologies: Body, Brain, and World*, which emphasizes the contemporary relevance of pragmatism for the sciences of the mind, and in particular the pragmatist influence on embodied approaches in cognitive science.

Pragmatism, Truth, and Meaning

Since its inception, pragmatism has often been doubly misunderstood in mainstream academic philosophy, on the one hand, as being a theory of truth and not much else, and, on the other hand, as a bad theory at that. This is a mistake. From the start, pragmatism had much more to offer than simply a view on the nature of truth; moreover, what it did have to say about truth was wildly misinterpreted by critics.

In the common misinterpretation, the pragmatist theory of truth is seen as a competitor to the correspondence theory of truth, both of which, in turn, are attempts to answer the question *what is "truth"?* The intuitive answer is that an idea, statement, or belief is true to the extent that it agrees with reality: Truth, in this sense, is usually defined as accurate representation of, or correspondence to, the way the world actually is. In contrast, James famously proposed a view that equated an idea's truth to its expediency or instrumental usefulness:

> Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally. (James 1907, p. 58)

This pragmatist position is often misconstrued as proposing that *truth is whatever works*, that is, an idea, statement, or belief is true to the extent that it leads to good consequences – so that it is acceptable to believe falsehoods when the belief is beneficial to the believer and, moreover, that in such cases the falsehood is even to be counted as true! This way of framing the pragmatist view of truth was ridiculed (and rightly so) by many then and ever since, prominently including Bertrand Russell (see Russell's 1908 paper republished under the title "William James's Conception of Truth" in Russell 1910; also Russell 1945; and discussion in, e.g., Putnam 1992). Already in the 1907 book James acknowledges and rejects a version of this misinterpretation and criticism, stating: "Dewey says truth is what gives 'satisfaction.' He is treated as one who believes in calling everything true which, if it were true, would be pleasant" (James 1907, p. 234). The continued popularity of misconceptions like this one led James to publish, 2 years after the first *Pragmatism* book, a follow up titled "*The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to 'Pragmatism'* " (James 1909). Thankfully, this supposedly pragmatist view is a caricature, and not at all what James and others proposed.

The pragmatist view of truth as put forward by James was not meant to be an alternative to the view that truth is a matter of agreement with reality: Rather, as James explicitly put it, the concern is with clarifying "what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement,' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with" (James 1907, p. 198). And agreement with reality, James proposed, is a very practical matter. In what would become one of the most famous statements of this view James claims: "'The true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving" (James 1907, p. 222). Were this the whole story, the critics might have a point. But James further clarifies that, in equating an idea's truth to its expediency, he has in mind a process that unfolds over time rather than merely a static property an idea might have of being instrumentally useful in the here and now. The passage continues with James explaining that he means "expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the

experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily" (ibid.). Over the long run, an idea that at first served as a good guide for action may turn out to be less adequate than expected for dealing with novel problems and situations. When this happens, and we act on an idea but the world pushes back, we discover reasons to revise our way of thinking. This does not mean that the idea was entirely wrong, but just that it is no longer right enough given the novel circumstances.

There are two important aspects to the move James is making here. The first is this. If we see "truth" according to the correspondence view, as a matter of accurately copying or representing reality, then it follows that an idea may be true and at the same time be useless, or that it may be useful but false. This takes for granted a distinction between the true and the good, a distinction that seemed inadequate for James. As he puts it, "truth is one species of good, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinate with it. The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons" (James 1907, pp. 75–76). Later on, he elaborates on this idea:

> To copy a reality is, indeed, one very important way of agreeing with it, but it is far from being essential. The essential thing is the process of being guided. Any idea that helps us to deal, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that fits, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality. (James 1907, p. 213)

In the case mentioned above, of an idea that later turns out to be less useful than it had been at first, we do not have to conclude that it was false: If at first it worked to some extent, that is reason to think that it was true, at least partially; and this is precisely the intuition that pragmatism attempts to ground philosophically by equating truth to expediency – expediency admits of degrees and can be context-specific.

Besides this rejection of the assumption that truth and goodness are distinct and independent characteristics of ideas, a second aspect of the

pragmatist view is worth emphasizing. This is the proposal, already alluded to, that truth is a process rather than a static property. As James puts it, "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not" (James 1907, p. 201), to which he adds:

> The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation. (James 1907, p. 201)

As already seen, when James equates truth to expediency, he emphasizes the importance of thinking of expediency in the long run. Now framing truth as a process, we see that it is over time, as our ideas get applied and tested, that they can turn out to be worth believing and acting on. An idea that gets verified and validated is an idea that agrees with reality to the relevant extent and is thereby an idea that gets made true. It is in this sense that James proposed, "Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes," further adding, "Truth is made, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience" (James 1907, p. 218). In contrast with thinking, for instance, that an organism is healthy because it contains within itself a distinct positive property of "health," it makes sense to see the label as more simply denoting the organism's having so far withstood the test of experience (e.g., exposure to pathogens and potential accidents without grave consequences). Similarly, James proposes, an idea is not true because it has a static property (e.g., the property of accurately representing reality) but, rather, it is made true – and more or less so – over time, through the test of practical experience.

The pragmatist theory of truth, then, is not meant as an alternative to the view that ideas are true to the extent that they agree with reality: Rather, it is a clarification of this view. An idea agrees with reality when we act on the idea, or act guided by it, and over time the idea proves to work in relevant ways, successfully connecting current experiences with previous ones, and adequately preparing us to move forward and face new

possibilities in the novel experiences to come. And, importantly, none of this was supposed to be novel and revolutionary. In the subtitle of his 1907 book, James described pragmatism as "A New Name For Some Old Ways Of Thinking." This is, as already noted, partly a nod to Peirce. For Peirce, we attain the greatest clarity in our thinking about some object when we can identify how our thinking relates to practical effects. When it comes to abstract concepts or theoretical constructs in science, for instance, there is only so much we can advance in our understanding by distinguishing these from other concepts and constructs: The clearest understanding of the object in question comes when we can operationalize it in terms of measurable interventions and manipulations along with their practical effects. In this sense, James is elaborating on, and giving a new name to, this older method proposed by Peirce of identifying an idea's meaning by tracing that idea's practical effects. But besides recognizing Peirce's contribution, James' description of pragmatism as "a new name for some old ways of thinking" can also be seen as a nod to common sense. In emphasizing, on the one hand, that truth is a kind of good (rather than a distinct property independent from expediency) and, on the other, that truth is a process (i.e., of verification), James offers a way of cashing out the philosophical conception of truth in terms that apply to everyday life and that ordinary folk will recognize, even if some philosophers will find dubious: Truth is made when and where the rubber meets the road. Truth *is* agreement with reality, but it is an agreement that is earned through practical tests and over time: In this sense, truth is the name for our ideas' expediency rather than an independent characteristic that can make ideas useful; in other words, truth is itself a practical good, rather than a source of good and instrumental success.

Pragmatism and Cognitive and Existential Possibility

The importance of experience and practical effects in pragmatist thought goes far beyond these more widely known but narrower applications in philosophical discussions about truth and meaning, extending also into domains as varied as education, ethics, religion, and politics. And underlying all of these, especially for James, is pragmatism's psychological dimension.

Although James' contributions to the development of psychological science precede, by decades, his publications on pragmatism, already in these earlier writings pragmatism is present in spirit even if not yet in name. James' *Principles of Psychology*, for instance, was published in 1890 but contained material from at least as early as 1878, and it can be read as putting forward a picture of psychological science and mental phenomena that was pragmatist through and through. One dimension of this pragmatist orientation is made evident by the specific way in which James saw psychology as continuous with biological science. In contemporary usage, "biological psychology" tends to have a reductionist flavor, denoting explanations of mind and behavior in terms of physiological mechanisms, especially at the genetic and neural levels (see popular textbooks, e.g., Toates 2007; Garrett 2009; Barnes 2013; Kalat 2015). This strategy of explaining behavior by reference to elementary intraorganismic causes was already popular in James' time, especially among those developing psychophysical and structuralist approaches (e.g., Wundt and Titchener). In contrast, James' approach was to understand mind in terms of the relations that organisms bear to their environment: For James, we can only make sense of mental phenomena by understanding their practical conditions and effects, or the life context in which they are situated in the first place (see Heidbreder 1933; Leary 2018). This might seem like a move away from biological explanation, but it was in fact a perspective that James inherited from the distinctly naturalist and ecological orientation in biology developed by Darwin. For Darwin, the diversity of species could not be accounted for solely by intraorganismic processes (e.g., mutations) without reference to interactions among organisms and between organisms and their surroundings, in their real contexts, as they unfold and change over (evolutionary) time. James applies the same explanatory strategy in the domain of psychology.

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For him, mind cannot be equated to internal processes nor to inward-looking abilities for abstract reasoning and detached reflection: Rather, he proposes, the defining characteristic of mind is the situated and practical "pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment" (James 1890, p. 21). Psychological science, then, is founded on a "biological conception" that is also equal parts pragmatist: "man, whatever else he may be, is primarily a practical being, whose mind is given him to aid in adapting him to this world's life" (James 1899, p. 25).

Besides inspiring a whole new way of doing research in the sciences of the mind (Heft 2001, Crippen and Schulkin 2020; see also ▶ Extended Mind), this radically situated, pragmatist biological conception of our mental lives has far-reaching implications for several domains. In his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* James emphasizes its educational significance, claiming: "Education, in short, cannot be better described than by calling it the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior" (James 1899, p. 29). Instruction and learning, whether formal or informal, do not amount to the transmission of "knowledge" understood as the memorization of abstract bits of information. And even reframing knowledge as being about embodied habits, although a move in the right direction, can still fall short from what James is proposing. The metaphor of knowledge as something that can be transmitted at all suggests the possibility of an absence of knowledge: That is the learner's state prior to the transmission. But this does not work for thinking about habits because the absence of habits is impossible. Living creatures, James explains, are "bundles of habits" (James 1890, p. 109): We are bundles of patterned possibilities for behavior or conduct that we have developed due to our plasticity, that is, due to "the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once" (p. 110). All of us already have all kinds of habits because of how we have been shaped by experience: "We learn all our possibilities by the way of experience" (p. 1099). And that is why the goal of education is not

the *acquisition* of habits, as if we did not have any in the first place, but rather the *organization* of the habits that already make us who we are: Education of one sort or another is the steering or constraining of those habits in this or that direction, toward some practical possibility aimed for. Based on this fundamental principle, James offers a number of recommendations to instructors that resonate with more recent pedagogical trends emphasizing cooperative, active learning. And he also makes recommendations to learners, for instance, warning students against trying to prepare for exams by cramming (James 1890, pp. 623–624). Importantly, these implications of a pragmatist, biological view of our mental lives apply to all development, not only that which happens in formal schooling. As James puts it, "The great thing, then, in all education, is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy," to which he adds, "For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague" (James 1890, p. 126).

This pragmatist, biological emphasis on habit, or the plasticity of our practical possibilities, also has important moral, spiritual, and political implications. James illustrates this in his essay titled "Is life worth living?" (James 1895). There, he rejects the usual perspectives that go for absolute answers. Instead of categorically affirming the positive worth of all of life or pessimistically denying it, James emphasizes the open-endedness of our existence. His answer is *maybe*: Life may not be worth living, but it can be; ultimately, this depends on the liver, because life "is what we make it" (James 1895, p. 22). Some people living in quite adverse circumstances come to contemplate the possibility of suicide, as James himself did, and he concedes that it could well be that their existence is not worth continuing. But that is not something you could be certain of. For the religiously inclined, faith can be a reasonable and rationally justifiable source of significance (on this, see James' 1896 essay *The Will to Believe* and his 1902 book *Varieties of Religious*

Experience; see also ▶ Spirituality). For others, "mere instinctive curiosity, pugnacity, and honor may make life on a purely naturalistic basis seem worth living from day to day" (1895, p. 15). Most basically, even though there may be many aspects of life we cannot control, what anyone *can* do something about is their attitude and outlook, the way they habitually approach and deal with life's circumstances. We can, for instance, "conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves" if only we persevere in "[going] through the outward motions of those contrary dispositions we prefer to cultivate": Accordingly, James advises, "Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key," and sooner or later "The reward of persistency will infallibly come, in the fading out of the sullenness or depression, and the advent of real cheerfulness and kindliness in their stead" (James 1884, p. 198; see also ▶ Emotion). There is no guarantee that this will be enough of a consolation in our darkest hour, but it just might work. In the face of uncertainty, the pragmatist stance is that life can be meaningful if we make it so: "possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities that we encounter" (James 1895, p. 23), so "Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact" (p. 24). As an answer to the question whether life is worth living, this may not seem as satisfying as categorical affirmative or negative answers, James concedes, but it is an honest answer.

Life's radical open-endedness is thus both constrained and enabled by our habits. The plasticity we exhibit in our ways of encountering life's circumstances makes it possible for us to develop and learn in certain directions (that is education in the broad sense), and it also empowers us to construct meaning and significance in the pursuit of new practical possibilities. And these considerations at the individual level also bear an important lesson for life together, in society.

We are plastic bundles of habit, which means that our experiences shape us over time in part through the influence from the environment and in part through our resistance to that influence. This transactional process of development opens up new cognitive possibilities but also closes off others. And this is so not only in the usual contemporary sense of "cognitive" as synonymous with "psychological": In this sense, dominant since the Cognitive Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s (Miller 2003; Boden 2008), it follows from the picture provided by James that development (i.e., the organizing of certain habits) leads to cognitive specialization in that it gives us mental abilities we did not previously have, but in so doing it also precludes others; our coming to be *this* bundle of habits means that we have not become *that* other bundle of habits. But there is more to it. The term "cognitive" derives from the Latin *cognoscere* (meaning "to know"), and, traditionally, it included an epistemic dimension. This richer sense was the usual one in James' time, and according to it a cognitive process is not simply a process that goes on inside the mind, but it is a process of coming to know something: In this sense, psychological phenomena such as perception, memory, or language are cognitive to the extent that they play an epistemic role, contributing to our achieving knowledge of the world. And in this sense, development opens up possibilities for knowing and understanding aspects of reality while also limiting other ways of knowledge and/or limiting our knowledge of reality to some aspects rather than others.

As practical beings, James explains, each of us "is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth" (1899, p. 229–230). Our particular embodied, situated existence makes certain aspects of the world more salient, and some possibilities more compelling or repulsive, than others. This unavoidably unique perspective we have on the world has as its counterpart "a certain blindness," as James puts it, namely "the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves" (1899, p. 229). For James, coming to understand this fundamental character of our embodied cognitive (i.e., psychological but also epistemic) existence motivates adopting a pluralist attitude and embracing a politics of tolerance. We may be unable to understand why others act in certain ways, but we can appreciate

the fact that, like us, they are approaching the world from a unique point of view from which those actions appear as compelling, valuable, and perhaps even necessary. For James, "the truth is too great for any one actual mind (. . .) to know the whole of it" and "The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal" (James 1899, p. v). And so, beyond simply informing how we think about education or the meaning of our own life as individuals, the pragmatist picture inspires seeing others as similarly embodied bundles of habits who have developed in particular ways that might have endowed them with cognitive and existential possibilities we just cannot know or understand very well. Pragmatist thought and its emphasis on practical effects, then, has a very clear practical consequence: "The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality" and "the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant" (James 1899, p. v).

Conclusion

As seen at the beginning of this entry, "pragmatism" in a colloquial sense suggests a down-to-earth and perhaps even narrow-minded attitude of favoring what is most feasible over other potentially better but less practical possibilities. The previous sections showed that pragmatism in the philosophical sense *is* indeed concerned with emphasizing practical effects in many different domains. Importantly, however, the emphasis that pragmatism (in the narrow, technical sense) places on the practical is intimately connected to its emphasis on exploration of, and openness to, the wide range of possibilities available to us. In a personal letter he wrote in 1906, James makes the following observation:

> I have no doubt whatever that most people live, whether physically, intellectually or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being. They make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness, and of their soul's resources in

general, much like a man who, out of his whole bodily organism, should get into a habit of using and moving only his little finger. (James 1906/1920, pp. 253–254)

The specific context of this claim is interesting. James' correspondent, W. Lutoslawski, had tried to convince James (then in his mid-sixties) to take up yoga, to which James responded in this letter that he had tried some breathing exercises but had found them unpleasant and unhelpful. In the passage immediately preceding the quote above, James notes that, based on Lutoslawski's description of its effects, yoga might just be "a methodical way of waking up deeper levels of will power than are habitually used, and thereby increasing the individual's vital tone and energy" (James 1906/1920, p. 253).

We often fail to notice or act on the full range of possibilities available to us. James' observation makes sense in light of his pragmatist description of humans as bundles of habits and practical beings who are both empowered and limited by their plasticity. But pragmatism also motivates working to expand our boundaries and explore the unknown. And this is something that the specific context of James' observation – namely his experimenting with bodily practices and disciplines – makes quite vivid. More than a theory of truth, pragmatism encompasses a view of the nature of education, the significance of life, and democratic coexistence, and underlying all of these, a view of what it means to be human. In these different domains, pragmatism emphasizes practical effects, but it does so to encourage openness to new possibilities rather than the narrow-minded closing off to them in favor of whatever seems most practical and convenient. This is in line with James' description of pragmatism as being ultimately simply a *method* or "an attitude of orientation": "The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (James 1907, pp. 54–55). This attitude helps us tackle deep metaphysical and epistemological problems, for instance, pushing forward our

understanding of the nature of truth and meaning. But it is very practical as well. Pragmatism invites us to think differently about life in its most mundane aspects and to enrich it by exploring new possibilities for ourselves and for society: It just might work out.

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