
Remarks Concerning the Relevance of Pragmatism for Contemporary Psychotherapy

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Abstract

The relationship between classical philosophical pragmatism and the development of modern psychology is hardly one that has been ignored. After all, William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, in addition to their more explicitly philosophical deliberations, all published significant and influential work in psychology proper. James and Mead, most especially, have had an enduring impact on the field of psychology, both as it emerged and as it has evolved.

My interests in this paper are more narrow and specific. The focus of my concern is the theory informing certain contemporary "mindfulness based" psychotherapeutic practices that have appeared within the broader context of modern cognitive behavioral therapy. These include, perhaps most prominently, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and dialectical behavior theory (DBT). Even here the relationship to pragmatism has not been completely neglected. The development of ACT, for example, has been explicitly linked to its roots in a certain type of American pragmatism that is most typically called "functional contextualism." Nevertheless, within such accounts, the term "pragmatism" is very broadly and vaguely construed; moreover, functional contextualism, as a theoretical perspective, seems more immediately indebted to B. F. Skinner's behaviorism and Stephen Pepper's philosophy of science than it is to the pragmatism of Peirce, James, Dewey or Mead.

The central argument of this paper is that the classical American pragmatists supply important and hitherto unexamined theoretical resources for psychologists engaged in these mindfulness based therapeutic practices. Indeed, even the turn to mindfulness meditation itself as an effective strategy for dealing with various forms of mental disorder can be articulated and defended in terms supplied by philosophical pragmatism. While both traditional and contemporary Buddhist sources and materials are typically cited for this purpose, I would argue that the pragmatic insights of Charles Peirce and William James, in particular, might be just as useful or even more felicitous. Here I am thinking most directly about the detailed analyses that both philosophers pursued of the concept of *attention*. I re-frame such analyses as a significant resource for contemporary psychotherapists interested in rooting their practices in fertile theoretical soil.

The paper begins with a brief sketch of functional contextualism as a philosophical perspective, including an assessment of the various respects in which it might accurately be labeled as "pragmatic," even in the classical sense. The decisions to emphasize function over

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form and to scrutinize the various contexts shaping human behavior clearly do seem to have some kind of classically pragmatic inspiration. In the spirit of worrying about the excessive vagueness that can often afflict general categories, I want to say something briefly both about the "pragmatism" informing certain contemporary psychotherapies and the related issue of whether or not pragmatism entails or implies a commitment to some kind of "behaviorism." But the bulk of my attention in this paper will be devoted to the concept of attention itself, specifically as Peirce and James so carefully explored it (the former most prominently in some early essays published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, but then subsequently in several other instances; the latter most extensively in his early work on *The Principles of Psychology*, but also quite insightfully in his later lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.) I will propose that this somewhat neglected aspect of classical philosophical pragmatism (that is, the attention that it pays to the phenomenon of attention) nicely complements Buddhist philosophy toward the end of providing a rich theoretical context for the practical pursuit of mindfulness based therapies. It is beyond my competence to explore how and if such a broadening of psychotherapy's theoretical underpinnings might affect its actual practice. But pragmatism's relevance can certainly be established in terms of the light that specific pragmatic insights shed on various clinical strategies and practices that are already quite commonplace.

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