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# Experience and Critique. Placing Pragmatism in Modern Philosophy.

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## Abstract

Even though Pragmatism currently enjoys a revival, it is still contested what this approach actually entails. Pragmatism is well known for its insistence on fallibilism, its emphasis on communication and signs, and of course for its practical conception of thinking and understanding. But all of this can also be had by other means and traditions, i.e. Idealism, (Post-) Analytic Linguistic Philosophy or Post-Positivist Philosophy of Science. How, then, should we treat pragmatism's contribution to philosophy?

I will argue that Pragmatism offers a distinctive and significant answer to a central issue of modern philosophy. Its unique contribution comes into view if we look at the importance of the notion of 'experience' for the Pragmatist classics – for James, Peirce and especially Dewey. The significance they attach to this concept is, as I will argue, a clear-sighted appreciation of the importance of experience for modern philosophy as a whole. Classical pragmatism not only presents a distinct understanding of experience, by modeling it after the image of experimental scientific practice. By presenting such a model and seeking philosophical support for it, Pragmatism also shows that the "Discourse of Modernity" (Habermas) is essentially an ongoing controversy about the right understanding of scientific practice and its wider implications. This controversy is at the heart of the modern project of philosophy - or so I will argue.

The modern philosophical project centers on the question of critique. This is the question, first explicitly raised by Kant, of how criticism and critical thinking actually is possible. Criticism and critique not only become a favorite topic of philosophical investigation up to our times. They also constitute the essential method and self-understanding of modern philosophy, which is characterized by recognition of human finitude and a corresponding renunciation of traditional metaphysics and "dogmatic" thinking. In this modern perspective, human reason is no longer a tool or an objective principle to fully comprehend and contemplate the given

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order of the world. It is rather understood as a finite, and yet self-standing capacity to continuously investigate and correct one's own beliefs, hopes and expectations. The bulk of philosophy since Kant implicitly or explicitly either defends a variant of this modern vision of autonomous rationality, or conversely reveals its problematic and even dark sides.

This enlightenment ideal of reason as critical thinking is, as I will show, based on a wide-spread modern appreciation of the natural sciences. The rise and success of the natural sciences, also called "the scientific revolution", is the one paradigmatic historic event which gives credence to the modern idea of reason. Critique and criticism has become such a natural option for modern philosophy since it seems to be embodied, and to be lived, in the practice of the sciences. They succeeded in toppling even the most deeply engrained beliefs by way of argument and rational demonstration.

Arguably, experience is the most important lever to exercise this power. "A wise man", Hume wrote, "proportions his belief to the evidence." Modern philosophy, however, has demonstrated that this advice is difficult to heed. The notion of experience turned out to incarnate both the hopes and the dangers of the modern understanding of rationality. On one hand, it is experience, and not tradition or authority, which is supposed to ground our rational claims. On the other hand, experience can only acquire such a rational authority if we are able to understand it. This, in turn, requires us to bring it under given concepts – risking that experience, once understood, loses its challenging "otherness" and critical potential.

This is why in modern philosophy, since Hume and Kant, we can witness a seemingly endless coming and going of theories of immediate experience. There are those, like Hume or the Vienna Circle, who defend the idea that there is no knowledge of the world beyond experience. And then there are those, like Kant, Sellars or more recently McDowell, who point out that there is no such thing as an unmediated, non-conceptual access to the world. Pragmatism's contribution to this debate is that it refuses to take either side. It sees that experience is not a way to gain "access" to the world, but rather constitutes the very form that living in the world assumes for a finite (biological) being. It reconstructs experience as the circular motion of articulating, and coming to grips with, experience and its possible content. Like the hermeneutic tradition, it proposes to jump into the modern circle of understanding and to accept it as the proper image of modern finite rationality.

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