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Philosophy for Professionals: Towards Critical Pragmatism

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Pragmatism must be one of the most underestimated and misunderstood philosophical traditions of our epoch. It certainly merits more attention than it has thus far received in the applied disciplines. Richard Ormerod's (2006a) has recently offered a useful review of the history and ideas of pragmatism from a professional's perspective; I would like to respond to his effort by offering a few thoughts as to where we go from here.

Finding out what pragmatism means – to us

Reading Ormerod's paper felt a bit like reading the kind of paper I always wanted to write but never dared to! Skilfully he has woven together standard accounts of pragmatism and pragmatist thinkers offered by philosophical reference books, historical accounts such as those by Kuklick (2003) and particularly by Menand (2001), and his own reading of some of the original writings, notably James (1907) and Dewey (1937). This is a demanding task because the reference books are often rather unhelpful, being too cursory, and the historical accounts, because their biographical rather than systematic orientation and their detailed character provide an *embarras de richesse,* are rather difficult to overview. The result took me on a journey back to some of my academic roots in the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, which had influenced me particularly through some of the writings of Charles S Peirce (1878) and William James (1907) and indirectly also through the influence of Peirce on Apel (1972, 1980, 1981) and Habermas (1971, 1990, 1993)

and that of James and Dewey on Churchman (1948, 1979; Churchman's teacher Edgar A. Singer was a student of William James).

Although I have always remained aware of the influence of the American pragmatists, I have never found it easy to sum up their ideas in short form. Whenever I tried (as for instance in Ulrich, 2001, pp. 8-15 and in Ulrich, 2006, pp. 57-73), I found myself writing about my own ideas on reflective research and practice rather than about theirs! Something similar happened to me when I was reading Ormerod's account of the history and ideas of pragmatism; I could not help recalling my past and current efforts to develop a *philosophy for professionals*.

As the British pragmatist philosopher F.C.S. Schiller (1907, cited in Haack, 1996, p. 644) once observed, there are probably as many pragmatisms as pragmatists. Indeed: what pragmatism means depends – in the true spirit of pragmatism – on what we make of it, that is, on the way we allow it to change us and to make a difference to our practice as researchers and professionals. To me, the promise of pragmatist thinking consists in a philosophical and methodological interest that I have made the centre of my academic work, the *quest for reflective research and practice,* whereby 'reflective' means '(self-) critical', 'emancipatory', and 'ethical'.

Thus seen, Ormerod cannot dispense us from finding out for ourselves what pragmatism means. He does an admirable job of providing a starting-point though, from which we can begin to delve into some of the literature he surveys and engage in conversation with the founding fathers of pragmatism, with a view not so much to finding out what pragmatism 'is' but rather, how it might change us.

The affinity of pragmatism to current practice

With the 'us', I mean both our individual notions of sound professional practice and our collective understanding of OR as an applied discipline. With regard to the second task, Ormerod's paper, beyond summarizing the idea history of pragmatism, provides a short but useful characterization of the ways in which pragmatist philosophy *mirrors* many essential aspects of contemporary OR practice. This is less obvious than it may seem at first glance, given that a majority of OR practitioners today still prefer to understand their

efforts in terms of conventional science-theory and particularly of Karl R Popper's (1959) Critical Rationalism, and that most theoreticians of OR practice (Ormerod mentions Jackson, 1999, and Mingers, 2000) currently tend to emphasize the role of theory while ignoring or dismissing pragmatism.

Part of this low esteem may be due to a trivial misunderstanding, in that pragmatist philosophy is still widely (but inadequately) equated with a kind of theory-free common-sense pragmatism in an everyday sense of the word. Whether we like it or not, this impoverished notion of pragmatism also mirrors prevalent practice! However, anyone who bothers to read the pragmatist philosophers will quickly discover that pragmatism, far from exhausting itself in a stance of unreflecting common-sensism, is in fact a rich source for reflection on practice, which is exactly what theory as a guide to practice is supposed to achieve. Ormerod certainly avoids this kind of common misunderstanding, but I fear the way in which he characterizes the merits of pragmatism, namely, as an approach that 'fits what we do and how practitioners behave in practice', will do little to overcome it among his readers. And of course, the question remains: 'so what?'
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The difference that pragmatism might make for practice

I would suggest that the merits of pragmatist philosophy, beyond its being close to current practice, lie in its potential for *changing* the way professionals understand their role and 'behave in practice'. Why bother and read the pragmatists, if we do not expect them to make a significant difference towards better professionalism? In so far, it is not sufficient to note the affinity of standard OR practice with pragmatist thinking; we also need to ask what kind of methodological difference pragmatism might make so as to help the discipline meet the challenges of the future.

Overcoming methodological deficits of pragmatism

With this question in mind, I fear a more serious reason for the low status of pragmatist philosophy in the applied disciplines lies in what I would diagnose as a certain *methodological weakness* when it comes to translating its ideas into rigorous research

practice. Despite many fundamentally correct ideas that were ahead of their time and continue to be surprisingly modern – American pragmatism was the first philosophy of science that cut across the empiricist/rationalist divide and uncovered the discursive and societal character of knowledge – the pragmatist tradition has not been particularly successful in articulating practical methodological principles and corresponding conceptual frameworks for research. In the old struggle between relevance and rigour, pragmatist philosophy is (potentially) strong in making a difference that matters, but (actually) weak in securing methodological rigour. This observation begins with Peirce's (1878) rather obscure introduction of the pragmatic maxim, which (if taken seriously) has difficult holistic implications; it continues with James' (1907) expansion of the pragmatic maxim to a theory of truth that ultimately appeals to subjective acts of belief and thus has strong relativistic implications; and it ends, in the recent history of OR, with Churchman's (1979) dialectical systems approach, which despite its insightful nature offers little methodological guidance to professionals and decision-makers and accordingly has had limited appeal for them.

Overcoming ethical relativism

On top of the issue of methodological rigour – and in view of pragmatism's recognition of the primacy of practice over theory perhaps even more significant – I would diagnose a second major weakness. Without a careful *ethical grounding,* pragmatic practice risks boiling down to an unreflecting ethical relativism or at least will find it difficult to avoid the suspicion of mere opportunism and utilitarianism. Yet I observe that the pragmatist tradition of philosophy has not been very successful in working out a conception of ethics that would lend itself to systematic use in professional intervention. I do not mean to say that pragmatist philosophy pays little attention to ethics – read James, Dewey, and Churchman! – but only that it has not been able to explain how exactly we can methodologically secure ethical practice, in the sense of dealing systematically with the normative implications of 'pragmatic' research and practice. To be sure, the pragmatic tradition is not alone in this respect; classical (e.g. Kant, Bentham) as well as contemporary approaches to ethics, notably the neo-contractarian approach of Rawls

(1971) and the discourse ethics of Apel (1972, 1980) and Habermas (1990, 1993), experience similar difficulties.

In this situation, we probably need to mobilize all available sources of reflection on 'good' practice, including the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. It seems to me pragmatism does indeed lend itself to such reflection, if only we care to articulate and develop its core ideas in accurate methodological terms. I am thinking, for example, of what I consider to be the 'critical kernel of pragmatism'; of the untapped methodological potential that I see in the pragmatic maxim; of the largely unexplored opportunities for bringing together the divergent but in many respects complementary strands of pragmatic thinking in contemporary thought, particularly as embodied in systems thinking on the one hand and in critical social theory on the other; and, connected to the last point, I am also thinking of the chances that such an effort may offer for bridging the current methodological gap between pragmatism and contemporary conceptions of ethics. I can only hint at some of my respective ideas here, but I hope to detail them in a future paper.

Uncovering the critical kernel of pragmatism

Pragmatism as I understand it contains a much-neglected critical kernel. Thus the pragmatic maxim (or 'pragmatic principle'), according to which our conception of an object or situation is the sum-total of the practical bearings we conceive it to have, for me represents more than a rule for clarifying the empirical content of concepts and hypotheses along the lines of (never-ending, comprehensive) inductive reasoning, as Peirce understood it. If we take it seriously, it just as well requires us to question the normative content of all our claims to knowledge and understanding, that is, their unavoidable *selectivity* regarding the 'practical bearings' that we consider relevant for judging the object or situation in question.

For all practical purposes, the meaning and scope of valid application of a concept or proposition depend on our boundary judgments as to what 'facts' (observations and forecasts) and 'values' (worldviews, ideals, ends, and norms) are to count as relevant, and these judgments (as the word is meant to suggest) are not given to us by nature or dogma but are a matter of pragmatic selection in the concrete situation. Practice almost by definition needs at some point to pass from deliberation to action and thus cannot

endlessly consider ever more potentially relevant facts and concerns. Nor is there in a world of complex interdependencies any natural end to the process of unfolding all potential 'practical bearings' of a proposal. Selectivity, not comprehensiveness, is the fate of all practice.

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This is why I believe the usual holistic understanding of the pragmatic maxim is not really helpful. Because comprehensiveness is unachievable, such an understanding does not lend itself to methodological operationalization. A better idea is to understand it as a critical principle only; it can then help us in dealing systematically with the mentioned core issue of selectivity, and in addition becomes relevant not only as a criterion of meaning in empirical science (as Peirce had it) but as well as a principle of critically-normative reflection on validity claims, whether of an empirical (scientific) or a normative (ethical) nature. Methodologically speaking, it follows that both in applied science and in applied ethics, we may operationalize the pragmatic maxim as a systematic effort of *boundary critique,* the methodological core principle of my work on critical systems heuristics. Without boundary critique, pragmatism remains methodologically arbitrary! No wonder, then, that it has not succeeded thus far in securing rigorous practice – rigorous, that is, with respect to both the empirical and normative implications of 'what we do and how practitioners behave in practice'. This is the *'critical turn'* of our notion of competent professional practice and research that I propose to associate with the pragmatic maxim (Ulrich, 2001, pp. 11, 14f, and 23f).

Tapping the methodological potential of the pragmatic maxim

Thus far, the pragmatic maxim has hardly been used for the benefit of grounding professional practice in a realistic notion of applied science and expertise, no more than in a realistic conception of applied ethics. A key aspect of real-world professional intervention is that it always takes place in a specific context of action, so that whatever findings and conclusions we arrive at are basically limited in their meaning and validity to that context. Yet the basic methodological grounds on which we can in principle justify our findings and conclusions are those of science and ethics, both of which assume the possibility and desirability of generalization – of empirical observations and hypotheses to

theoretical explanations in the case of empirical science and of normative assumptions and norms of actions to universal moral principles in the case of ethics. This is why the two concepts of 'applied science' and of 'applied ethics' face professional practice with so many difficult methodological issues!

It seems to me that a relevant philosophy for professionals should take this in-built tension between *the contextualist and the universalist poles of sound practice* seriously. It should thus search for ways to mediate between the contextual nature of professional practice and the generalization principle underpinning our contemporary models of applied science (as exemplified by mainstream science-theory and critical rationalism) and ethics (as exemplified by discourse ethics). The good news is, the pragmatic maxim can help us achieve this! As I have argued elsewhere, it embodies both poles of thinking and therefore lends itself to a reformulation that allows its critical use against any one-sided reliance on either contextual or general argumentation (Ulrich, 2006, p. 70f).

Bringing together the traditions of systems thinking and critique

Another difficulty for the development of pragmatism into a well-defined philosophical framework for professionals may be this. Pragmatist philosophy has unfolded its historic role by influencing many different strands of thinking rather than by becoming a self-contained 'school' of reflection on science and ethics. From hermeneutics to critical theory to post-modernism, there is hardly a major contemporary strand of philosophy that it has not influenced. In the recent history of OR and other applied disciplines, two pragmatic strands of thinking have been particularly relevant in this context, I mean the two traditions of *systems thinking* (James – Singer – Churchman – Ackoff) and of *critical social theory* (Peirce – Apel – Habermas). Both have become influential in many applied disciplines. Both have important roots in American pragmatism but have thus far developed separately, with opposite strengths and weaknesses. While the tradition of systems thinking has long been rather uncritical with respect to the normative implications of systems practice, the tradition of critical social theory has been rather helpless in rendering its critical ideas practicable. A critical understanding of the pragmatic maxim as I have suggested it above promises not only to give new critical relevance to pragmatist philosophy, but also to overcome this impossible alternative of practicability

versus critical defensibility, by marrying the two traditions of systems thinking and critique (Ulrich, 1996, p. 171, and 2001, p. 12).

Bridging the methodological gap between pragmatism and ethics

If applied disciplines such as OR are to live up to their ambition of promoting 'the science of the better' (INFORMS, 2004), it is essential that they integrate their notions of applied science and expertise into a *practicable ethical framework.* This is especially true for 'pragmatically' oriented approaches, lest they become prisoners of a merely instrumental and utilitarian concept of rationality and fall victim to a bottomless ethical relativism. My specific suggestion in this regard is that we try to connect pragmatism with discourse ethics, in a way that would embed pragmatic practice in discursive ethical practice and, at the same time, would overcome the impractical nature of discourse ethics that is due to its underpinning ideal model of rational discourse. I have elsewhere (Ulrich, 2006) given a detailed account of the basic methodological conjectures that might guide such a 'pragmatization' (sic!) of discourse ethics and which simultaneously promise an ethical grounding of pragmatic practice – two efforts that I suggest to subsume under the title of '*critical pragmatism*'.

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Critical pragmatism as I understand it combines classical pragmatist conceptions of inquiry, meaning, and truth with the *critical turn* of our notions of rational discourse and professional competence that is at the heart of my work on critical systems heuristics and boundary critique. I should point out – and I am obliged to Richard Ormerod (2006b) for drawing my attention to the fact – that the term 'critical pragmatism' has been used by a few other writers before; in particular, a number of commentators (notably Deegan, 1988) have associated it with the work of the American sociologist and social reformer Jane Addams; Harris (1999) has used it to characterize the work done by the American philosopher Alain Leroy Locke on African culture and on the contribution of blacks to American culture; and Maxcy (1991) has used it to describe his work on educational leadership. In addition, I find the term in the subtitle of a reader on public policy and planning practice edited by Forester (1993). It thus appears that the term is not entirely unknown (although rarely used) in the fields of cultural and educational theory as well as

planning theory, particularly in conjunction with a radical-reformist stance. Deegan (1988, p. 26), for instance, defines it as "a theory of science that emphasizes the need to apply knowledge to everyday problems based on radical interpretations of liberal and progressive values." In distinction to such previous uses, I suggest to use the term for a *methodological* renewal and development of pragmatism, a project that in my view should not depend on any particular ideological or political stance. In any case, I do not mean to lay claim to the term 'critical pragmatism' but merely suggest to associate it with the mentioned methodological aims and ideas, with a view to developing a 'philosophy for professionals' and, related to it, to a philosophical grounding of ethical practice that would overcome the application problems of discourse ethics and other approaches rooted in ethical universalism. I hope Richard Ormerod and others who share my interest in developing a 'philosophy for professionals' will join me in this undertaking and will then equally consider themselves as 'critical pragmatists'.

Last but not least: learning from the applied disciplines

Along with operational research, many other applied disciplines (to name just three: action research, evaluation research, and strategic management) have developed practical principles and tools that lend themselves to reflective practice and which therefore might well yield some cornerstones of a pragmatist framework for professional practice. I am thinking, for instance, of the role of the *participatory principle* in action research; of the use of *methodological triangulation* in evaluation research; of the tool of *stakeholder analysis* in strategic management; and of the development of *'soft' (problem-structuring) and 'critical' (problem-questioning) systems approaches* in operational research. An obvious way to advance pragmatic philosophy in matters methodological is thus to 'borrow' from these fields some of their methodological core principles and to review them in the light of pragmatist philosophy (including the above suggestions for critical pragmatism).

Conclusion

Expanding and revising existent philosophical and methodological frameworks is never an easy undertaking. It is a continuous process that must go on along with and be based on both philosophy *and* practice, whereby the two sides must learn to work closely together. Neurath's (1959) metaphor of *ship-at-sea repair* is not a bad formula for describing the situation. The hope that some grand theory might provide a secure methodological dry dock is probably futile, if not outright dangerous (Ulrich, 2004). Perhaps this is why I always found occasional exchanges with open-minded practitioners (among them Richard Ormerod) at least as meaningful for developing my philosophical efforts as I found debates with so-called theorists of OR practice. Conversely, I suspect that thoughtful practitioners may find occasional (if not continuous) philosophical reflection to be just as meaningful for developing their practice as discussions with other practitioners. Meaningful is what can change us; when pragmatist philosophy and professional practice enter in an open and sincere conversation, chances are they will change one another mutually and thus will be most meaningful.

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[¦1113]

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