

Action as Philosophic Method

Stéphane Madelrieux
 Maître de conférences en philosophie contemporaine
Assistant professor of contemporary philosophy
 Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3 (Lyon, France)
stephane.madelrieux@univ-lyon3.fr

Introduction

- Some historians and sociologists are now claiming to be pragmatist or close to pragmatism because, as they say, they are doing a history or a sociology of practices. But to my mind, it is not sufficient to study practices or actions to be recognized as a pragmatist. There are of course many ways to define pragmatism, but if we are to define it in relation to action, I would like to defend here the thesis that the pragmatist turn does not consist in making action the privileged topic of philosophy, but in making action the *instrument*, the *method* by which studying all the other topics, whatever they are. To speak bluntly, I would even dare to say that pragmatism is not *as such* a philosophy of action (I will have to soften this statement later), in so far as action is not taken as the principal object of inquiry but rather as the method to inquire on all the traditional objects of philosophy, such as consciousness or language.

- I am thus taking the pragmatic turn to be primarily a revolution in method. One of the main advantages to do so is to enable us to compare pragmatism with other methodological revolutions that are supposed to define the “present dilemma in philosophy” – as William James would have said.

- On the one hand, the linguistic turn in analytical philosophy did not consist in taking language as the only correct object of philosophy, but in taking, as Rorty said, “the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use” (Rorty, 1992, p. 4) ; so that we should not confound “linguistic philosophy”, that uses language as a method, with “philosophy of language” that considers it as an object.

- On the other hand, the historicist turn in continental philosophy did not consist in taking philosophies of the past as the sole object of present philosophical activity, but, similarly, in understanding all philosophical problems and concepts through the study of their historical formation ; so that we should not confound “historicist philosophy” with “history of philosophy” : past philosophers are not studied for themselves but as part of a grand narrative that allows us to deal with current philosophical problems taken as the logical outcome of this narrative.

- If we present the comparison in this way, we would have grounds to argue for the superiority of pragmatism. In fact, we could use the same argument that James offered against the tough-minded and the tender-minded of his days. Pragmatism can serve as a mediator since it can “satisfy both kinds of demands” (P, p. 33).

- On the one hand, we may consider language as a practice related to other practices, so that the linguistic turn can be understood within a more general pragmatic orientation in such effect that we could talk either of a ‘linguistified’ pragmatism or a ‘pragmatified’ linguistic philosophy.

- On the other hand, Dewey gave us a grand pragmatist narrative of the history of thought since the Greeks that offers us a convincing alternative to those dominant in continental philosophy, as the plot is not built on the “forgetting of Being” or the “curse upon Difference”, but on the devaluation of action. Dewey is thus able to present Modernity not as, for instance, the replacement of a philosophy of being by a philosophy of subject, but instead as the replacement of speculation by action as the core value of occidental culture. That this pragmatist turn has already taken place in science, but has failed to produce all its effects in philosophy is, according to him, the source of all our current philosophical problems. For him, as for Habermas, modernity is still the name of an “unfinished project” that can be accomplished only by transposing into philosophy the active method that has succeeded in science.

- The point of my talk is thus to outline the face of pragmatism when we take it as an action-orientated method of philosophy. But I will also follow Rorty’s conclusion on the linguistic turn when he says that no methodological revolution is in fact presuppositionless, “in the sense of being dependent upon no substantive philosophical theses for their truth” (Rorty, 1992, p. 4). I will thus suggest that we could profitably see some of the major difficulties and oppositions within the pragmatist movement as coming from divergences on the nature of action that are presupposed by the pragmatists, so that the pragmatist method is not wholly independent of any substantive philosophy of action.

1. Philosophy from a pragmatist point of view

1.1. Conversion and inversion

1.1.1 Method and attitude

- Both Peirce and James used to set out pragmatism as being primarily not a doctrine but a method and only a method. But “method” in this first sense is too restrictive a word to denote what I mean when I talk about action as a method. Firstly because it implies a set of precise rules to follow, such as the pragmatic maxim and I do not think that any definite rule is necessarily linked with the use of action as a method. Secondly because these rules apply in this first sense only to meaning, while all the concepts and problems of philosophy should be concerned if pragmatism is to be a revolution in method. But this first definition of pragmatism, historically speaking, gives us the clue for a more general definition.

- We can thus borrow James’ expression when he says that pragmatism represents a general “attitude” in philosophy, rather than a specific method (cf. P, pp. 31-32). He defines the pragmatist turn precisely by a change of general orientation: if you want to solve philosophical problems, you should turn away from ‘abstraction’, ‘verbal solutions’, ‘fixed principles’, ‘supposed necessities’, ‘absolute origins’, and turn instead towards ‘concrete’ experience, towards ‘facts’, towards ‘consequences’, towards ‘action’. As empiricism was already the attitude of turning towards experience, positivism towards facts, and utilitarianism towards consequences¹, we may suppose that the specific difference of the pragmatist attitude lies indeed in its general orientation towards action in order to solve or dissolve philosophical problems.

1.1.2. Pragmatism and intellectualism as general attitudes

- The character of a revolution is well noted by the image used by James of a complete change of orientation, a ‘turning forwards’ which is at the same time a “turning away”. It shows that we

¹ And nominalism towards particulars.

cannot understand pragmatism without its polemic dimension, which is directed against what pragmatists called “intellectualism”. Intellectualism, as the true opposite of pragmatism, is thus not primarily a substantive doctrine on, for example, the nature of intellectual functions or the value of theoretical knowledge, but a general methodological stance at work in all the fields of philosophy, ethics and aesthetics included. Indeed, what pragmatists criticize in intellectualism is not so much such and such substantive theses than a general *inversion* in the explanation of phenomena (indeed, the reverse attitude of pragmatism)².

Such criticism takes several forms: we can recognize it under James’s expression of the “psychological fallacy” (PP), that consists in explaining our knowledge by acquaintance by our knowledge-about rather than the reverse ; or what James calls variously the “rationalist’s fallacy” (P, p. 110), the “vicious intellectualism” (MT, p. 89n.), the “vicious abstractionism” (MT, p. 135) or the “abuse of concepts” (SPP), which consists in explaining the concrete by the abstract rather than the reverse ; or what Dewey calls the “philosophic fallacy” (EN, LW 1:34) that “converts eventual functions into antecedent existence”, that is to say explaining what is functional by what is substantial and what is contingent by what is eternal.

Intellectualism as a specific doctrine on the purely theoretical function of intelligence is thus only an illustration, though a crucial one, of this more general inversion.

- For the pragmatists, the challenge is thus firstly metaphilosophical rather than of the first order. It is to show that all philosophical difficulties that still puzzle us today are due to this general frame of mind that is intellectualism, so that taking the pragmatist turn is the good method to get rid of those artificial puzzles and solve the real problems that we have to cope with. For concrete examples, I refer you to all the passages where James or Dewey show that knowledge, causation, change, relation, personal identity, etc., become impossible from the intellectualistic point of view (cf. for James, SPP, p. 48, with Bradley as the intellectualist par excellence³).

1.2. Some philosophical concepts pragmatically considered (illustrations of the action as philosophic method)

1.2.1. Pragmatic meaning of the pragmatic maxim

- With this critical attitude in mind, we can come back to the pragmatic maxim and ask ourselves what is the pragmatic meaning of the pragmatic maxim. Why is it so important to use the pragmatic method of making our ideas clear? What practical difference does it make in the conduct of life if people in general held to the pragmatic method rather than its intellectualistic counterpart? In other words, what is the value of the pragmatic maxim for the problems of men and not only for the problems of philosophers?

- By stating that any theoretical difference must make a practical difference, the maxim helps people to get rid of all discourses, whatever they are, that prevent them from making effort to change their situation when it is not satisfying. It is a weapon that helps us to clear away all discourses that prevent us to do something when something needs to be done. In short, from a cultural point of view, it is an instrument of *progress*, or rather for progress. Indeed, the maxim says that the *meaning* of a discourse is the practical *change* it would make if we were to act upon it;

² This inversion is coupled with a relative devaluation of the *explanandum* (whether it be action, experience, consequence, contingency, etc.) in contrast with the *explanans* (speculation, reason, principle, eternity, etc.), so that the pragmatic conversion (action, experience, etc. do not need to be explained, as they are rather the *explanans*) coincides with a reevaluation of it and a new coordination with the other term of the distinction.

³ For Dewey, cf. “the problems to which non-empirical method gives rise in philosophy are block to inquiry, blind alleys, puzzles rather than problems” (EN, LW 1:17)

and the *value* of the discourse is measured by the practical *improvement* such a change would make. All theoretical discourses that do not make practical differences somewhere have no meaning and all theoretical discourses that keep the status quo or make things worse in the long run have no value.

- On the contrary, the intellectualistic attitude consists in the end by assuming that a change in the situation is not the solution. This position comes from what we could call the “Greek dilemma”:

- Either the reality is already perfect and you do not want to change it because it would make it worse;

- Or the reality is imperfect, but you do not want to change it either, because its imperfection comes precisely from its changing character, so that your action would make it worse, as it would produce more changes than there already are.

The only change you are authorized to make is thus not in the world (if it is possible, cf. Wittgenstein) but on yourself, and consists in an ascetic conversion – precisely the one of turning away from the empirical world of action, towards the ideal world that you can only contemplate, in the hope not to change it, but to have it or even to be it. On the contrary, the pragmatic maxim illustrates the more general pragmatic turn by giving us the rule not to merely possess our concepts, but to use them in order to bring about some good in the world.

1.2.2. Some examples of a pragmatist lexicon

Such a maxim thus leads to a redefinition of traditional concepts of philosophy. You all know how we could write a pragmatist lexicon where all traditional concepts would be defined in terms of action. It is another way to say that action is not the principal concept to define for the pragmatist, but rather the instrument to define all the other concepts.

Here are some familiar examples:

- *Doubt* is not the intellectual state of the skeptics, but a hesitation in acting (that is an uncertainty as to what needs to be done with the conscience that something must be done)

- *Belief* is not the vivacity of a purely intellectual state, but a disposition of action

- *Sensation* is not essentially a gateway of theoretical knowledge, but a stimulus to action (or the signal of the need to readjust our current action, cf. Dewey, RP, MV 12:129-131)

- *Perception* is not a combination of sensations or of sensations and concepts, but the anticipation of possible actions

- *Ideas* are not general objects of contemplation, but plans of action,

- *Values* are not ideals to be cherished for themselves, but “imagined possibilities that stimulate men to new efforts and new realizations” (Dewey, RP, MW 12:147).

Etc.

1.2.3. Action and experience

- Of particular interest here is the reconstruction of the traditional concept of “experience” in terms of action. The title of my talk is an allusion to the first chapter of Dewey’s *Experience and nature* entitled “Experience and Philosophic Method”. In this chapter, Dewey claims to elaborate a “philosophy of experience”, but he prevents us from making a mistake about what he means by saying that “experience for philosophy is method, not distinctive subject-matter” (First edition, EN, LW 1, appendix 2, p. 371). This proposition rightly suggests that classical empiricism was not primarily a new metaphysics of experience, but rather “an attempt to introduce the experimental *method* of reasoning into moral subjects” (Hume), and thus a methodological revolution. Experience was thus taken as a mean for dissolving all the puzzles related for instance

to the notion of substance. But the very instrument that should have solved or dissolved all philosophical problems in the hand of classical empiricists have led to the formulation of a series of new puzzles that constitutes the present philosophical situation of the classical pragmatists.

- If experience is subjective and private, how can we solve the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge?

- If experience is made of a purely mental stuff, how can we solve the mind-body problem?

- If experience is already and by itself a form of knowledge, how can we solve the problem of the existence of an independent reality?

- If experience is a collection of impressions, how can we solve all the problems resting on relations, such as the relation of one state of mind to another?

- If experience is individual in principle, how can we solve the problem of the composition of a social community? Etc.

- Against those who tried to take advantage of this situation within the empiricist movement to impose the intellectualistic method as the best way to solve these puzzles, the classical pragmatists claim that all these puzzles came in fact from the use of an imperfect instrument, and, if pragmatism is to make a difference with classical empiricism, it would consist in the *improvement* of this instrument, whose defects cause these very problems. In other words, they tried to reconstruct the instrument of reconstruction itself – such is the way of philosophical progress if there is any. And I would defend the thesis that neither the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* nor *Experience and Nature* aim primarily at giving a metaphysics of experience, but that they are attempts to reform the concept of experience in order to unblock the road of inquiry, to get rid of these artificial puzzles, that is to say to continue the empiricist turn with a better tool than Locke and Hume had.

- If James' and Dewey's empiricism is pragmatist, it is because the way to reconstruct experience as the philosophical instrument is for them to define it in terms of action. By this way, all those above mentioned puzzles could be cleared away.

1. The fact is widely acknowledged for Dewey, who reconstructed the notion of experience from both the biological notion of *interaction* and from the epistemological notion of *active experimentation*.

2. But it is true of James himself. When he claims that ordinary empiricism must be reformed by granting that “the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations” (ERE, p. 22), because the philosophical problems come from the “general pulverization of all Experience” (p. 23), he has in mind a dynamic conception of relation. Even in the chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* on the perception of space where he proposed for the first time his analysis of relation⁴, he shows the empirical reality of space-relations by identifying them with *the act of tracing a line*. “The line is the relation” (PP II, p. 791) - the line we could empirically trace. In the same way, the problem of the mysterious relation of an idea to its object is simply solved by saying that it can be identified with the action of passing continuously from the one to the other, through empirical intermediaries – action that he even calls a “deambulation”. Experience is here reconstructed through the notion of *trans-ition* or *leading*, but the result is the same than for Dewey: enabling us to use again experience as a philosophic method.

2. Pragmatist philosophy and philosophy of action

⁴ On the psychological construction of the spatial world as the origin of James' radical empiricism, cf. Madelrieux, 2008, ch. I.

I now come back to the question of the relation of pragmatist philosophy to the philosophy of action, which takes action as its subject-matter and proposes some substantive theses on its nature. In classical pragmatism, “action” is not subject to a systematic inquiry as it is in what is now called the philosophy of action. You will even have a hard time to find any major book or article by Peirce, James or Dewey whose title contains the word “action”⁵. What we may call a minimal philosophy of action is nevertheless required for the pragmatist attitude to be possible. I will first outline in what ways it was necessary for pragmatism to accept minimal commitments about action, and then discuss the difficulties that it arises.

2.1. Minimal commitments

2.1.1. Minimal ontological commitment

- If you are to use action as an instrument to reconstruct the others concepts, you will have sooner or later to justify why action is the good instrument, instead of, for example, language or history. Of course, your first reason will be that if you use action as a method, the value of the method is given by its results, so that if you succeed to show that philosophical problems are solved or dissolved by this way, you will not necessarily need a more substantive justification. But supporters of linguistic philosophy or historicist philosophy also claim to have succeeded with their respective instrument, so that this lack of agreement about “the criteria of philosophical success” (Rorty, 1992, p. 4) forces the pragmatist to have a stronger justification. And this stronger justification commits him to show not only the methodological but also the ontological primacy of action.

- The reason why action is not defined in pragmatism but is used to define other concepts is that it is taken as a primitive term from an ontological point of view. All the other terms are supposed not only to be defined by it, but to be derived from it. We can distinguish three main stages in this genesis (I simplify it for convenience’ sake):

1. *The first one* is the identification of action and reality. The influence than Darwin should make on philosophy is the replacement of fixity by change as the criteria of reality. Nothing is real that is not changing or liable of changing. As action is what causes changes in any state of things, a pragmatist can say that nothing is real that is not affecting other things by its action or being affected by the actions of others⁶.

2. *The Second stage* is where the derivation of all the main concepts from the category of action begins: the stage of organic life. Organic life will be defined as *a special kind of action*, as opposed to other forms of change. Organic life characterizes this specific kind of action in nature that is an interaction between an organism and its environment, where the organism’s actions

⁵ We may mention James’ “Reflex Action and Theism” (WB); Dewey’s “Perception and Organic Action” (1912) - but it is a critical review of Bergson’s Book *Memory and Matter*. We may also quote Georges Herbert Mead’s book, *The Philosophy of the Act*, but it is the publication of conferences made in 1930, so more than 50 years after the beginning of the pragmatist movement. Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty* has for subtitle “A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action”, but it is clear that Dewey is not interested in action in itself, but by what it can teach us about knowledge, which is the main topic of the book.

⁶ “The conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years, the conceptions that had become the familiar furniture of the mind, rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality. In laying hand upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion” (Dewey, ID, pp. 1-2) ; “And change rather than fixity is now a measure of ‘reality’ or energy of being; change is omnipresent” (Dewey, RP, MW 12:114).

change the environment in which it lives in order to satisfy its vital interests⁷. If something goes through some changes only due to the pressure of the environment, then we can assume that this thing is not a living organism, as there is no interaction. The environment must be *made* as well as found by the individual, for it to be a living being. And the minimal interaction is, from the part of the organism, what is called a reflex action, which is thus the elementary living behavior, an undergoing related with a doing.

3. *The third stage* is the apparition in nature of *a very specific kind of living interaction* that may be called “intelligent”. Intelligence and knowledge will thus be defined in the same derivative fashion than we defined life by the more general category of natural change or action. Intelligent interaction occurs when an organism takes into account in its own action the future outcome of this action. When an organism begins to change its spontaneous or reflex course of action by taking into account the possible reaction of the environment to its own action, then its action acquires a new quality, which is intelligence⁸. Mind is thus not defined as an entity dissociated from the active body, but as a quality of specific actions.

- This natural history of knowledge may indeed justify the use of action as a method to analyze concepts and problems, because this ontological derivation is the reverse process of the method of analysis. If, for example, Dewey can define ideas as plans of action, it is because he thinks possible to retrace the ontological origin of ideas back to some specific kind of action. We may thus confirm our thesis according to which there is no philosophy of action properly called in pragmatism, as action is never approached independently but always in relation to mind, knowledge, language, society, etc., - but it nevertheless entails a minimal commitment about the ontological primacy of action over mind, knowledge, language, etc., that makes a minimal theory of action necessary.

2.1.2. Minimal epistemological commitment

- There is another reason for a theory of action to be necessary, which leads this time to an epistemological commitment, even if minimal. As I said about experience as a philosophic method, we do not need any reflexive consideration on a given method as long as it works. But the lesson of the classical empiricists were that if you do not use a good instrument, you may produce more puzzles than you were supposed to solve, so that a reflection on the instrument, whether experience or action, is necessary in order to prevent such a situation. Pragmatists were thus forced to propose some substantive theses on action, because if misunderstood, the very concept of action would be useless or inefficient as a problem solver.

⁷ “Wherever there is life, there is behavior, activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment. This adaptive adjustment, moreover, is not wholly passive; is not a mere matter of the moulding of the organism by the environment. Even a clam acts upon the environment and modifies it to some extent. It selects materials for food and for the shell that protects it. It does something to the environment as well as has something done to itself. There is no such thing in a living creature as mere conformity to conditions, though parasitic forms may approach this limit. In the interests of the maintenance of life there is transformation of some elements in the surrounding medium. The higher form of life, the more important is the active reconstruction of the medium.” (Dewey, RP, MW 12:128).

⁸ “... knowing is one kind of interaction which goes on within the world. Knowing marks the conversion of undirected changes into changes directed toward an intended conclusion. [...] ... knowing is a form of doing and is to be judged like other modes by its eventual issue [...] This is part and parcel of nature’s own continuing interactions. Interactions go on anyway and produce changes. Apart from intelligence, these changes are not directed. They are effects but not consequences, for consequences imply means deliberately employed. When an interaction intervenes which directs the course of change, the scene of natural interaction has a new quality and dimension. This added type of interaction *is* intelligence.” (Dewey, QC, LW 4: 163-164,171)

- To put it simply, if according to Dewey all philosophical problems take the form of dualisms where one of the term refers to something related to theory and the other to practice (whether it be mind and body, spirit and matter, reason and experience, end and means, value and fact, etc.), you can use action as a method to dissolve these problems only if you have a concept of action that does not already depend on these dualisms. Otherwise, you are doomed to fail. It is the reason why, I believe, all classical pragmatists agree in thinking human action as being not a purely mechanical movement of the body, but as being an “intelligent” behavior, that is to say purposeful and guided by interests. They reject mechanism as strongly as they reject intellectualism, and for similar reasons. A mechanical account of action presupposes the dualism between mind and body, spirit and matter, experience and reason, that action as an instrument is supposed to dissolve. The mechanization of the concept of action (like the pulverization of the concept of experience) is the best ally an intellectualist can dream of to make the intervention of a purely spiritual intelligence necessary in order to compensate the deficiencies of a blind action. How could ends and purposes be introduced in the empirical world of action if this latter is only ruled by mechanical causality? Either ends and purposes are mere subjective illusions (materialism), or you need the addition of a supernatural agent to guide from the outside the movements of the body (spiritualism)⁹.

- It explains why, among the rare texts on action that pragmatists wrote, the more detailed ones are devoted to explaining the nature of reflex action. It is very important to show that even on the lowest level of behavior, action is not blind but orientated towards an end, so that it cannot be explained only in terms of mechanical causality.

1. In all his *Principles* as well as in “Action Reflex and Theism”, James explains that in a reflex arc, the sensory impression exists only for the sake of awakening the central process of reorientation of the nervous current in the spine, and this central process exists in its turn only for the sake of calling forth the final act, which is the reaction to the sensory impression. The process is thus teleological, as it must terminate in a reaction, which is itself not a mere mechanical effect of the sensory impression taken as its cause: this reaction is made to be beneficial, valuable, for the organism which performs it, so that it is not a mere effect of a cause, but a *response* to a stimulation, which is very different.

2. Dewey’s anti-mechanism is even more radical in his famous article “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896), which had be “seen as an anticipating criticism of behaviorism”¹⁰. According to him, the idea of a *reflex arc* still pays too much tribute to the dualistic and mechanistic schemas, as it is expressed in terms of a rigid distinction between stimulus and response, sensation and reaction; we should substitute the idea of a reflex *circuit* to that of an arc, abolishing by this way the last remnant of efficient causality that still persisted in the idea of a linear segmentation of the action¹¹.

⁹ On the same move concerning experience, cf. James: “The natural result of such a [ordinary empiricist] world-picture has been the efforts of rationalism to correct its incoherencies by the addition of tranexperiential agents of unification, substances, intellectual categories and powers, or Selves ; whereas, if empiricism had only been radical and taken everything that comes without disfavor, conjunction as well as separation, each at its face value, the results would have called for no such artificial correction” (ERE, p. 23) ; and Dewey: “The strong point of the appeal to fixed principles transcending experience, to dogmas incapable of experimental verification, the strong point of reliance upon *a priori* canons of truth and standards of morals in opposition to dependence upon fruits and consequences in experience, has been the unimaginative conception of experience which professed philosophic empiricists have entertained and taught” (RP, MW 12:137).

¹⁰ Mathias Jung, “John Dewey and action” (*The Cambridge Companion to John Dewey*, Ed. Molly Cochran, Cambridge, CUP, 2010), p. XXX.

¹¹ “As a result, the reflex arc is not a comprehensive, or organic unity, but a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of unallied process. [...] What is wanted is that sensory stimulus, central connections and motor responses shall be viewed, not as separate and complete entities in themselves, but as divisions of labor, functioning factors, within the single concrete whole, now designated the reflex art [...] More technically said, the response is not merely *to* the stimulus, it is *into* it. [...] What we have is a circuit, not an arc or broken fragment

3. We could add that Peirce also stressed the triadic dimension of action as a way to show its irreducibility to the dyadicity of brute causality.

- The emergence of “intelligent or reflexive action” in the traditional sense can thus be explained in continuity with such a “reflex action” which is “intelligent” in a broad sense. Intelligence may thus be explained without turning to supernatural entity, as a way to substitute secondary reactions when the primary reflex or instinctive actions are not well adjusted or blocked for a reason or another. Then and only then the reaction is not only done, performed, but is also thought, that is to say directed, regulated or controlled. But it retains from its natural origin its purposiveness that forbids us to explain it only by causes¹².

- We could make the same demonstration about the dissolution of the fact/value dichotomy. You cannot use action as a way to dissolve it, if you start with a conception of action that does not emphasize that even a low-level action like a reflex action is not a mere physical fact in a material world, as if it were performed indifferently, but is *of value* for the organism, as it is done in order to satisfy some vital interest. A pragmatist is thus led to defend a substantive thesis about the nature of action in order to make it a good instrument to dissolve the philosophical problem of the fact/value dichotomy.

- In short, the pragmatist attitude which takes action as a philosophic method is far from being presuppositionless. To be convinced of the results of its application, you have to be ready to accept a loaded definition of “action”. Pragmatism cannot be a method and only a method, as if we would have reached a “neutral point of view” (Rorty) to solve or dissolve all philosophical problems.

2.2. Major difficulties

But at this point difficulties arises – I will only stress out the two most important ones to my mind.

2.2.1. Risk of formal circularity

The first one is the risk of circularity, and it is well noted by Rorty in its introduction to *The Linguistic Turn* (Rorty, 1992, pp. 1-2) which faces similar difficulties.

- We have seen that in order to adopt the pragmatist method, we have to accept some substantive theses in the ontology and epistemology of action.

- But we face here a dilemma:

segment of a circle. This circuit is more truly termed organic than reflex, because the motor response determine the stimulus, just as truly as sensory stimulus determines movement. Indeed, the movement is only for the sake of determining the stimulus, of fixing what kind of a stimulus it is, of interpreting it.” (Dewey, RA, EW 5:97 and *sq.*).

¹² “Certainly for the pragmatists human action is a topic of central concern. This concern, however, is not with ‘movement’ or ‘activity’ as such, nor with all the effects of ideas upon human life, nor with a complete theory of human nature. It is focused primarily (though not exclusively) upon one aspect of human behavior: intelligent action, that is, purposive or goal-seeking behavior as influenced by reflection. [...] Thus it is thinking man, man acting intelligently, that is at the center of pragmatist’s attention [...] No philosophy, however, can do everything, and we cannot expect a complete theory of human nature from philosophy alone. Intelligent purposive behavior, if not the whole of human behavior, is at least a distinctive and important part of it. Pragmatism is unique among modern philosophies in making such behavior the center of its analysis and construction” (Morris, 1970, “Pragmatism, the Practical, and Action”, pp. 10-12)

1. Either we attempt to defend these theses by the use of the pragmatist method, showing that the substantive idea of action that we need is a result of the application of the pragmatist method to make our ideas clear, but we are thus “open to the charge of circularity” (Rorty)

2. Or we do not defend these theses by this way, but we are thus open to the charge of arbitrariness of this theses (why this concept of action rather than another?¹³) or to the charge that “the pragmatist method is inadequate”, for it cannot be used in order to establish those crucial theses which are in dispute.

- The burden of the proof would thus rest entirely upon the results of the method, that is to say on its capacity to solve or resolve philosophical problems. But we would here only displace the dispute to what can be counted as a criteria for philosophical success in this matter, a question for which the difficulty to reach an agreement seems even greater. It could also be remarked that this last line of defence can still be open to the charge of circularity, as accepting a method for the practical reason that it works is already an instance of the pragmatist attitude applied to the general question of the meaning of a method.

2.2.2. Source of material oppositions

- The second difficulty arises among those already convinced of the necessity of the pragmatic turn. If pragmatism were only the application of a general attitude or even of specific rules, we could hope for no internal disagreement among pragmatists, except concerning the application of the method in such and such cases. But as soon as some substantive theses are formulated, substantial disagreements become possible.

- This problem is well documented for the linguistic turn. Disagreements on the nature of meaning led to disagreements on the type of analysis, whether it be the solution or dissolution of problems by the construction of ideal language or by the description of ordinary use of words.

- It could be fruitful to also see disagreements on the method among pragmatists as coming from disagreements on substantive theses on the nature of action. I can only refer here to the third part of Mathias Girel's dissertation (Girel, 2007), where the debate between James and Peirce is presented as a reflection on what kind of action may be counted as the “practical bearings” of the pragmatist maxim. It seems that Peirce thought James's concept of action too easily reducible to a brute and mechanical movement, as James, according to him, would not really recognize the *purpose* as being an essential element of all conduct. I think Peirce is wrong in his criticism, but it is nevertheless in these terms that the debate took place, and this disagreement about the nature of action engaged indeed different conceptions of the pragmatist attitude and different interpretations of the pragmatic maxim.

Conclusion

¹³ A pragmatist could reply that he takes his concept of action from the descriptions given in science, for example the description of the anatomy and physiology of reflex action. But it is manifest that the very description of reflex action that the philosopher uses is theory-laden as it is part of the dispute (between mechanism and vitalism in XIXth. century), so that the charge of question-begging remains. For instance, the very description of reflex action by Dewey is already animated by a spirit of criticism against dualisms (between stimulus and response, organism and environment) that this very description, taken as a methodological device for dissolving philosophical problems, will be in charge of sustaining and promoting.

My point was to distinguish pragmatist philosophy and philosophy of action, in the same sense that we recognize the difference between linguistic philosophy and philosophy of language, or historicist philosophy and history of philosophy. Pragmatism is maybe the first philosophical movement to have brought the concept of action independently of direct moral questions. But it may have done so unwillingly, so to speak, as it was not its prime object to give a philosophical theory of action, but rather to show how the consideration of action could help us to progress in all philosophical questions. To progress as the classical pragmatists hoped we could do requires from our part to improve the instrument they used as a method, as themselves tried to improve the instrument used by classical empiricists. But, we would be wrong if we thought that all our answers could come from what is now done under the name of “philosophy of action”. Because the theory of action that we need should not have its end in itself, but, in the pragmatist spirit, be thought as an instrument to improve the method of philosophy, and thus should not be considered as an autonomous field of philosophical inquiry, dissociated from this general hope of a better future for philosophy. If the pragmatist attitude is empty without a philosophy of action, the philosophy of action is blind without a pragmatist perspective.

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