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**THE TRUTH OR “USEFULNESS”? – THE MEANING
OF THE DILEMMA FOR THE PRAGMATISM
AND THE WAY OF THINKING IN THE USA**

In the beginning of the nineteenth century America was considered a cultural and economical desert. They were neither interested in the general ideas nor did they appreciate theoretical discoveries. In the field of technology European inventions were applied after being improved and they fitted well with the country's need. True knowledge came from experience and if the Americans had not gradually learned how to rule themselves, text book knowledge would not have helped them in anything. They tried not to think in a comprehensive way and the tradition was thought as the source of information. They searched for the cause of the phenomenon themselves. Every American applied to the individual work of his own mind¹. The efforts of the intellects were concentrated on amassing material prosperity. The Americans dealt with the literature in the least extent comparing with all civilized countries.

At the end of the 19th century, true American philosophy was born – pragmatism-created by Charles Sanders Peirce and then developed by William James and John Dewey. Pragmatism is a philosophical movement based on the rule of usefulness as the criterion of the truth. It inspired the research and scientific experiments, announced the

¹ A.de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 271.

belief in the possibilities of human cognition and operation. It was a philosophy checked in the daily life of the settling pioneers; it could have satisfied the needs of an intellectual and an ordinary man. The thought was based not on the theoretical truth but on the truth that is turned out to be useful in the specific situations. In the philosophy of pragmatism started by Peirce, and then developed by James, the touchstone of the truth is its utilitarian, practical function. As the man, who acts according to his free will, knowledge and experience, learns about the reality, he finds or forms the new truths and laws so he is also a creator of his own reality. Pragmatism creates the open world in which human thought evolves towards other truths and ideas. Pragmatism is against monist systems, the reality which is closed to an order given *a priori*, postulates experiment, searching and the principle of free choice². The beginnings of philosophical thinking in the USA are connected with the import of the German philosophical systems. After the American Civil War (1861) studying abroad in Germany became popular, which reflected the intellectual life of university societies. The German philosophical thought was popularized by political immigrants from Germany.

The originator of the term “pragmatism” and the set of methodological principles for scientific investigation, out of which the broad and varied trend of philosophical pragmatism in the USA grew, was Charles Sanders Peirce³. That trend penetrated later to almost all domains of the intellectual and social life in the USA. Peirce’s philosophical considerations, as well as the most of American written philosophical works of XIX century were shaped under the direct influence of European philosophy.

In Peirce’s pragmatism we can find clear influence of the classical English empiricism, the Scottish school, 19th century positivism and scientism, Kant’s philosophy and middle ages’ Duns Scott realism. According to Peirce “philosophy cannot begin with a total doubt” as it is with Descartes (Cartesius). We have to begin with all prejudices, we have at the moment, when we start to study philosophy. While studying we can face some doubts about that, what we used to believe before but it must be supported by our experience.

In the process of our reasoning we base on the internal power and however it is not enough to reach the truth, it is a crucial factor in gaining it. Direct cognition is a necessary basis in the process of cognition, determines this cognition and is a tool of its verification.

If we want to see the reality knowingly we cannot start our cognition from the general doubt.

We always have “the back” of convictions about which we do have no doubts.

We cannot develop our knowledge without referring to our experience.

Only through experience we can have direct contact with the world and this can only be “given” through experience.

The quintessence of pragmatism according to the Peirce school of thought was the principle explanation for establishing the meaning of the concepts, which he reached gradually by rejecting Cartesius’ philosophical tradition with its consideration over the

² A.Kopcewicz: *Historia Stanów Zjednoczonych w zarysie wiek XVIII-XIX*, p. 328.

³ Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was brought up and educated in Boston and Cambridge, where the biggest influence had the English ideals. The Peirce’s life did not reflect his ideas as he did not lead an ordered life and was difficult to live and work with.

issues of doubt and conviction and the critic of the traditional depiction of the clarity criteria and concept clarity.

The main condition, which has to be fulfilled before the research of a particular problems and the establishing the truth or falsity of certain statements, hypothesis and theories start, is a real, possibly full and clear establishing or understanding the meaning of the concepts.

Before we start examining the truth of the given sentence, hypothesis or theory we should understand its meaning.

The Peirce's pragmatism was often interpreted in the context of acting as the man's purpose. However Peirce explained that the acting cannot be the aim but on the contrary, it has a sense only as a measure to accomplish this aim. Peirce's "practical consequence" is a certain form of verification of the statements. These practical consequences that follow from the statements exhaust their meaning as there is no other way of establishing the meaning than through the "practical consequence".

The first heir and advocate of pragmatism was William James⁴. He first recognized and announced pragmatism as a new and distinct trend in philosophy. "James introduces Peirce as the creator of pragmatism, quoting his principle of the establishing the meaning of the concepts and theories by relating to the practical directives that follow from them and his thesis claiming that each belief contains certain hint of action⁵.

There often appeared misunderstandings about the philosopher's profile, that he provoked himself using informal and light-hearted style in his speeches (he kept repeating a sentence, that one should realize *cash value*⁶ – which gives a certain theoretical idea) and thanks to which you can change the prevailing reality. Experience is the only source where we can search for the answer to all our questions and problems. Experience is also the only criterion of the correctness of the cognition. It is not only possible to reach the final truth but abstract as well. Radical empiricism is, as he writes in *The Meaning of Truth* "first of all consists of postulate, second of the sentence about the fact and, in the end, of the general conclusion⁷.

Pragmatism, as James says, "has no statement except from its method"⁸.

But the radical empiricism, that James develops to the metaphysical form or outlook, has its own statements. These statements, as treated in themselves, can be supported on a different basis than those given by the radical empiricism.

It concerns the belief in God⁹. James used also a word "humanism", that means what differs true from false is satisfaction. "It is the internal relation of conviction to reality that gives us its peculiar satisfaction with truth, the satisfaction, that in comparison to which the other satisfactions are the biggest deception.¹⁰ We cannot consider a belief as

⁴ William James (1842-1910) played a crucial role in the rise and development of philosophy of pragmatism. His philosophical concepts grew also from the contacts with European thought.

⁵ H.Buczyńska: *James*. Warszawa 1973, p. 30-31.

⁶ W.James: *Pragmatism*, p. 161.

⁷ W.James: *The Meaning of Truth. A Sequel to "Pragmatism"*, Warszawa 2000, p. 99.

⁸ W.James: *Pragmatism*, p. 70.

⁹ F.Copleston: *History of Philosophy*, vol. VIII, p. 347.

¹⁰ W.James: *The Meaning of Truth...*, p. 157.

satisfying, meaning true, if it is not agreed with first verified beliefs or, if accessible data are against it.

However for James no belief can be the final one unless it can be reviewed.

Many of us heard and remember, especially in the USA when President George W. Bush in his first speech, after the military action had been started, presidential address to the nation, said that he had decided on the war in Iraq in order not to wage it in future in the streets of American cities with the firefighters and rescuers' hands. In these words Bush linked to the pragmatic arguments, visions of possible effects if the actions had not been taken.

Man's activity consists in subjecting oneself to his or her will and remaining in the world of his or her own creations, which are according to the will. We are in agreement with our world because we created it according to our intentions, or because these intentions and needs have been adapted to the reality given to us. "A pragmatist perceives the world as the infinite, changing, growing and elastic"¹¹. James introduced the meaning: "the stream of consciousness" which aimed to emphasize the continuous character of consciousness¹². He opposed in a principled way to the concept of sensualism, which divides experience into elementary sensual experience out of which the mind creates certain integrity based on the rules of association.

"The first and basic is not a simple impression but the stream of experience". New experience never begins in the emptiness; they always constitute certain already shaped whole, certain context or organization against which they cannot be independent, which absorbs it, determines and gives sense to it. It is my own *self* which join my experience in whole and gives sense to it in free and subjective way. Our will organizes our consciousness, which is connected with its emotions, needs and life. The will is not determined so the will of an each individual is different

Our needs and desires of our life are expressed in our will. Therefore cognition and experience are not disinterested, they are conformed to our aspirations, desires and needs. Our mind, on purpose, according to its desires, moulds its stream of consciousness. When recalling some events or analyzing some ideas, it always appears to our consciousness: the specific object of this what we are paying attention at. We have to think about something, watch something, we do not have memories of nothing, thoughts of nothing or images of nothing- this is the essence of consciousness. Cognition, experience and molding the stream of consciousness are only one of the forms of activity. "Psyche and body constitute one whole to James and for him there was no difference between spiritual and material needs. It means that the need of eating one's fill and the need of having clear conscience are the same manifestation of will. Cognition and action were treated by James as "the whole of different forms of human beings' lives and its principle link was category of will, which is the final expression of life and unites its all different forms"¹³. Will, according to James, controls human being's consciousness that creates the meanings as it controls his behavior and action.

¹¹ H.Buczyńska: *James*, p. 111-113.

¹² L.Koczanowicz: *Jednostka, działanie, społeczeństwo*, p. 39.

¹³ H.Buczyńska: *James*, p. 76.

I shall quote here James's standpoint on religion, which was an important element of his considerations. Religion to James was devoided of any cognitive value, but he thought that it has some emotional functions and it satisfy some feeling needs of human psyche. "Religion, James says, gives the life a certain charm, which cannot be rationally or logically derived from anything else"¹⁴. Religion is a private matter. "(...) When I worried about something, especially when I had a dispute at home or at work, or, when I felt exhausted mentally or had some financial problems, I can see now, that in searching for some help I based myself on my interest in something cosmic, in God. (...) Nowadays when I am not in this cosmic relationship, my life has lost because of it an important support. My life has become strangely dead and indifferent to me"¹⁵. This very aspect of spiritual life is interesting in James' pragmatism. Feeling is a constitute element of religious and mystic experience. "Kant advocated that such words as "soul", "God", "immortality" has not any relevant sensual content. It follows that, speaking theoretically, these are the words of no significance. But, however it seems strange, they have the meaning specific to *our practical life*"¹⁶. If faith cheers us up and thanks to it we feel better, than why not to believe. It is impossible to prove faith, but it is often that a believer is happier so he or she can manage better in life. According to pragmatism principles we cannot reject any of the hypothesis, unless there follow useful to our lives consequences.

The critic of the classical concept of truth, described as "intellectual" was a crucial way of the negation of intellectualism and paved the way for pragmatic thought. "Ideas become true only when they help us to reach satisfying relationships with other elements of our experience"¹⁷.

The truth of an idea is not a permanent property and it does not lie in it. The truth *happens* to an idea¹⁸. It *becomes* true thanks to circumstances. As W. James suggests, we are not entitled to treat ideas as true in a cognitive way, independently to our ability of their verification. The James' concept of experience includes not only cognitive elements but the emotional as well. It is a subjective experience, shaped by individual will.

As I mentioned above, for Peirce the action was not an aim but it had sense as the measure to reach such aim. "Practical consequences" fulfill the meaning of the sentences and there is no other way of characterizing the meaning than through "practical consequences". The James' interest was directed on the immediate effects, subjective reactions and so he tries to describe the truth relating to effectiveness of action, and he thinks about the truth's cash-value.

Pragmatism is to eliminate out of hypothesis what is not clear and has no rational meaning. And in action, in practice, in concrete activity we do our theories can find confirmation of their truth and reality.

First of all James emphasized concrete practical effects and stressed the concrete sensations and reactions. He postulated that to consider these ideas which are useful to human purposes to be true.

¹⁴ W. James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Warszawa 1958, p. 456.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁷ W. James: *The Meaning of Truth...*, p. 74.

¹⁸ W. James: *Pragmatism*, p. 161.

But pragmatism is also the theory of truth¹⁹. Possessing the truth is not understood as a purpose itself but on the contrary- it is only a measure to reach further purposes. Rational cognition of truth, reaching it, means the end of the searching for it. It means the end of the road. It is against "pragma". We will never achieve the goal but we always come closer to it by improving ourselves (whatever it means in philosophy, sociology and politics, especially in today's everyday life), we are proceeding further; the "final goal" is never reached, we are accomplishing another goals but never the "final" one. Similarly to the biological evolution, which creates better and better species, in pragmatism we are reaching the best truth which also evolves, changes; the old one is replaced by a new better one. There are lot of different truths and they are close and inseparably connected to the object. "*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify*"²⁰. So idea or belief is true if it "functions". Even false can be true if it "functions". It is easy to notice that the true one will be false if it turns out to be useful and it will be convenient to believe in it.

As we can see, James seems to have a psychological view of the problems of cognition. Our faith makes the views true; "person x believes the judgment is true". Through our acceptance we take theories for granted. The longer we will be convinced of idea's usefulness the longer it will be true- good to our life. I find similar a conception of truth in doctrines of Scientologist Church, where according to its founder Ronald Hubbard²¹ "The truth for you is this what you believe is true. You do not have to believe in anything in scienotology but you have to find your own truth. The truth that will be good for you. "

The truth is changed into usefulness. In further analysis we should avoid the word "truth" or "true" and stay at the category "usefulness".

James understood the word "usefulness" in a very wide range. Among other things it is connected with satisfying the will's desires and reaching the pleasure.

In the other sense, something is useful if it is the measure to reach the purpose, if it plays the role of a tool. Pragmatism in a subjective way changes the philosophy of life, success and achievements. Pragmatic attitude is tangible in the American society until now... Pragmatic conception of truth is fundamentally different from all these philosophical theories, which treat truth as an independent final cognitive value.

A traditional question about truth does not lay in this scope and way of cognition phenomenon analysis which were introduced by pragmatism.

Pragmatic method worked out by James, explained the sense of thought, showing the way of creating the behavior thanks to its influence on free will and emotions.

Pragmatic principle was to James "an interpretation of all kind of thought through drawing a right practical consequence"²². A pragmatic principle was a tool of understanding and comparing different conceptions. Thanks to this is possible to confront the thought with concrete experience. Practical consequences of the view is the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 161.

²¹ Hubbard Ronald Laffayette, American, founder of Scientologist Church in the USA. He was born on 13 March 1911in w Tinden, in Nebraska. The main Headquarter of the Church at present is Los Angeles.

²² W.James: *Pragmatism*, p. 66.

whole of the relation between an outlook and individual consciousness or rather lots of many separate consciousnesses. However, if we cannot translate certain ideas into concrete experience's language, they have to be rejected as being cognitive empty. Practical consequences for James are always concrete and individual. There are no abstractive, general practical consequences. They always exist "for someone", for an individual consciousness. Moreover they are not the same for everybody. Pragmatism in its depiction of truth meet a human being half a way²³. It is a simplified thinking system, perfectly adjusted to the human being's needs but the one from the street, someone who hates theory and desires to achieve practical benefits immediately²⁴.

This is why Americans are often perceived as not quite well educated and limited. The American system of education places emphasis on practical thinking rather than theoretical. Theoretical thinking requires more knowledge so it is more difficult. The core of this system is ability to acquire knowledge and its practical application. There is still room for theory as long as it leads us towards its practical application. Moreover it is good to know, what is useful, what should be known in practice and then you can supplement your education as far as you need it.

Such a model of education makes Americans be able to extremely creative thinking, but it does not mean they do not makes mistakes. Pragmatism, as mentioned before, has this big advantage, that it gives right to make mistakes and to correct them, while the strict doctrine has to foresee all possible circumstances.

In Jame's consideration and thinking about the world we use many ways, but the most popular is the **common sense** which is also called realism. Its virtue is comfort and transparence in characterizing the world. Common sense is based on everyday experience, tradition and authority. Theory can be in agreement with the common sense in such a way that it considers its application in recurrent actions. This way of thinking is fully adjusted to the individual's needs and changing circumstances in this world. People have got different needs so they apply different methods of satisfying them. Emotional, intellectual and practical needs, which are inherent element of a human life, push him to discover such forms of activity which are most right to him. In the face of all needs and their diversity we appoint in our lives, each way of thinking can draw valuable conclusions from the phenomenon vastness which surround us as well as valuable experiences. The "usefulness" James wrote about, in the contemporary world has a very important position especially in ordinary people lives and actions, in their everyday matters. Lack of "usefulness" do not attract our attention and we forget about it very quickly when something has no meaning to us. Work, performing different activities give us also very bad impressions, experiences and emotions but not necessarily without "useful" consequences. These consequences have good influence on our further behavior. It means that if we do something wrong and the consequences are unpleasant at the same time they will lead us in future if only we draw right conclusions.

William James wanted that searching the truth was certain *habit* of action. These habits give us what we want and lead us to where we want to get to. It is worth mentioning here that owning truth was also a tool in a proper and effective action. Theories became the instruments, the tools which served to link and systematize

²³ Ibid., p. 189.

²⁴ W. James: *The Meaning of Truth...*, p. 150.

observing sentences and calculating which make occurring of certain events prognosis possible, events which are described by the observing sentences.

The creator of instrumentalism, which is a version of pragmatism was John Dewey²⁵, the leader of pragmatists' "Chicago School". Dewey contributed most to fight speculative currents in America and to introducing experimental methods of thinking. He was deeply interested in the field of values and human behavior, society and education. He played an important role in America especially in the last one. Dewey used philosophy in the field of education and social matters. Cognition, knowledge and all human activities are the tools (instruments) of adjusting an individual to the environment and controlling it. What is good is always group thought creation. It is worth mentioning here that religion, because it is subjective, according to Dewey was useless and could be part of the common human truth.

When our reflection recognizes a problematic situation, then our thought tends to change the environment. Here the thought is in a way practical, and it does not matter if it occurs at the level of common sense or scientific theory. An intelligent action assumes the process of thinking and examining and these assume symbolizing and formulating sentences.

Sentences are in general logic tools, necessary to reach the final judgment, which is of existential importance, and the final judgment is reached by a sequence of halfway judgments.

The whole process of reasoning is a certain phase of intelligent actions and so it is the instrumental process in the face of real situation reconstruction. If a logical thought is instrumental, it is the effectiveness that certifies its importance. Dewey believed that from logical point of view, the definition of truth is the Peirce's definition. He thought that only those beliefs are true which are commonly recognized. Dewey tried to find the answer to the question what is the "now and here" truth? It turned out that the true is the sentence or hypothesis which leads us to the aim we lay. "True is the hypothesis that works", this view follows from pragmatic concept of meaning. The idea of usefulness is interpreted in relation to the process of reshaping problematic situation and this in Dewey considerations is something public and objective. It is why he rejected the theory of truth formulated before by James in which true is all that what is satisfying or what satisfies an individual. The value of certain hypothesis will determine its adjusting to "the needs and requirements imposed by a situation". The Dewey conception confirmed in a forcible way the pragmatic character of American philosophy.

Pragmatism is a wide intellectual and social current flowing through varied domains of life in the USA. Moreover it is the expression of varied and specifically American views, attitudes, temperaments or characters. In America since the very beginning of the state, they have tended to attach importance to action rather than to thinking and the truth of certain theory was evaluated according to its effectiveness in action. In the early thirtieths of 19th century Alexis de Tocqueville noticed extreme American nation's passion to practice and the respect to the theory²⁶. But the theory which has the meaning to the practice. Tocqueville wrote:

²⁵ John Dewey (1859-1952). Pioneer of pedagogy based on pragmatism. He claimed that as far as the success in life is considered intelligence is only one of the tools.

²⁶ A.de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 272.

“... hardly anyone in the United States devotes himself to the essentially theoretical and abstract portion of human knowledge”²⁷. Whoever will deal with a “pure” theory, which does not bring anything new into our lives and is not applied in practice and action. It is action that takes a bigger part of our life and it is the practice that improves our abilities and enriches our knowledge. The practice teaches us and at the same time points to these areas of knowledge which exploring is so important to our development.

Pragmatism is usually introduced as a peculiarly American movement, which is at the same time a tradition in North America. It was born in America, it developed there and it was popularized by its two leading representatives: Peirce and James, the first “national” American philosophers. Americans are idealists but in a very characteristic way as the ideas exist for them only if it is possible to carry them into effect and materialize.

One of the American contemporary philosophers Richard Rorty denies such a generally American characteristic as pragmatism. In one of his interviews we can read “Pragmatism is purely philosophical movement which started at the end of 19th century. It is not a philosophy characteristically American”²⁸. I can agree with Rorty that it is not a philosophy characteristically American but it has “got settled” in the minds of America inhabitants until now and it is typical for them. It is the attitude which is displayed in all domains of life as a national feature. The common equality of opportunities Tocqueville wrote about, still gives direction to this specific and common way of thinking in the USA²⁹. At the same time it shapes this pragmatic attitude which can be easily seen by everybody who has been to America even for a while.

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²⁷ Ibid., p. 299.

²⁸ Interview with Richard Rorty Dec. 2001 for *New ResPublica*.

²⁹ A.de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 27.