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The Pragmatic Method and the Philosopher's Practice

Introduction

Scientists normally tell at the beginning of their research reports what method or methods they have used in their research. That practice is less common in philosophical books and articles, although there are several philosophical methods in use and philosophers often mention and discuss their methods at some points in their texts. Philosophical methods are sometimes hidden, or they may be an integral part of the very philosophical activity. It may also happen that the whole study is both practicing philosophy and discussion about the method, as is often the case in phenomenological studies. Occasionally it is common knowledge within a philosophical tradition or school that a certain method is used, and therefore it is uninformative to describe the method to the intended audience at the beginning of each and every study. Philosophers' attitudes towards their methods vary; some are willing to say that methods are like tools that are applied to objects of research; others would regard the toolbox metaphor as completely misleading and argue that it is not part of the philosopher's practice to choose different tools for different purposes.

This paper is about the pragmatic method, more precisely, about the ways philosophers use that method. It is inspired by Sami Pihlström's book titled "*The Trail of the Human Serpent is Over Everything*": *Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion* (2008). In that book Pihlström interprets William James's pragmatic method and reconstructs a *Jamesian* view on what the pragmatic method is. He clarifies with several examples how the method can be used and how James uses it. The pragmatic maxim, which is the core of the method, is expressed by Charles Peirce (1878), and James also refers to Peirce's formulation in his *Pragmatism* (1907) (James 1975, 28). Like Peirce and James, a pragmatist thinks that our beliefs are rules for action. The meaning of an expression, the thought of an object, a scientific theory, and a philosophical view receives its content and value from its consequences, which are broadly understood. Those consequences include various kinds of effects, such as sensations, behavioral reactions, actions, and in the broadest meaning, the consequences to our lives. Pihlström stresses the ethical dimension in

his own Jamesian view. He points out that Peirce and James paid attention to different consequences. On Peirce's view, he argues, "James focused on particular experiences and practical consequences of actions, whereas the practical consequences that Peirce was interested in were general patterns and habits" (Pihlström 2008, 5). Pihlström's Jamesian view is thus interest in what is particular or local, and evaluation of abstract theories against the background of actual human life. More importantly, it is not focusing on the formal structure that a philosophical position possibly instantiates, even if Pihlström does not ignore the importance of logical consistency. Pihlström sees similarities between the pragmatic way of arguing and the transcendental argument, in which a philosopher starts with what is actual, that is, actual experience or human life, and moves "backwards" towards the necessary conditions for its possibility. He remarks that he interprets Jamesian pragmatism "transcendentally" and as a method which serves in the evaluation of "philosophical concepts, conceptions, problems, and hypotheses in terms of their (potential) ethical relevance" (Pihlström 2008, vi). He sees Peirce as a philosopher who was interested in the possible and the conceivable, and James as one who focused on the actual (*ibid.*, 13).

This paper is not about Peirce or James. Instead, it studies Pihlström's Jamesian pragmatic method by comparing it with Robert Brandom's method. Brandom is a Kantian pragmatist, who has been influenced by Peirce more than by James. In the next section, Brandom's theory of assertion is presented and described in terms of the distinction that Pihlström finds between Peirce and James. The paper then seeks to find ways of applying the method which Pihlström regards as Jamesian and which he values as a philosophical method, although he does not support James's philosophy in all its details.

Brandom's game of "giving and asking for reasons"

Brandom follows the pragmatist principle that beliefs are rules for action, and concepts and theories should be evaluated in view of what difference they make to practice. His maxim for semantic theories is as follows:

What gives semantic theory its philosophical point is the contribution that its investigation of the nature of contentfulness can make to the understanding of

properties of practice, paradigmatically of judging and inferring. That semantic theory is embedded in this way in a larger explanatory matrix is accordingly important for how it is appropriate to conceive the semantic interpretants associated with what is interpreted. It means that it is pointless to attribute semantic structure or content that does no pragmatic explanatory work. (Brandom, 1994, 144)

An important source to which Brandom and Jaroslav Peregrin, whose view comes close to Brandom's, both refer is Gottlob Frege's *Begriffsschrift* (1879) (Brandom 2000, 50; Peregrin 2014, 3 – 4). In that book Frege argues that two judgments have the same conceptual content if one can derive from them the same consequences when they are combined with a set of common premises (BS, § 3). Another source that points to the same direction is Wilfrid Sellars, who takes the meaning of a linguistic expression to be determined by the role it has in relation to perception, other linguistic expressions, and overt behavior, and to whom the connections between perception, language, and action are not basically behavioristically understandable regularities, but rule-governed and social (Sellars 1974, 423 – 424).

Brandom's philosophy focuses on semantic theory and logic and their links to practice. For Brandom, it is the rules that govern practice, not the regularities found in practice, which are relevant in view of semantic theory. Like Frege in his *Begriffsschrift*, Brandom argues that the inferential role determines the meaning of a word; what matters in logic and semantics are actions called judgments and their consequences. Beliefs are here rules for action, as Peirce would say, and judgments and inferences are seen as patterns or habits rather than particular actions. For Brandom, language is normative because its vocabulary is governed by inferential rules. Those rules include, but cannot be reduced to, the explicitly formulated inferential rules of a logical system. Even if Brandom emphasizes rules and normativity, he does not think that rules are all that can be told of language; instead, it is the persons, the users of language, and their normative attitude that is the final court. That includes the human activity of evaluating, hence, treating our own and others' utterances as correct or incorrect (Brandom 1994, 37).

Brandom's vocabulary is ethical in the sense of deontological ethics. He uses such expressions as "commitment," "entitlement," "responsibility," "authority," and even "deontic attitude." An assertion is an act and an acknowledgment of a commitment to a belief. In Brandom's theory, commitment and entitlement are two kinds of deontic statuses. Being entitled to assert means having authority; being committed to what has been said means having responsibility. One

who asserts is entitled to make inferences from her assertion and to use her assertion as a reason, but she is also committed to give reasons for her assertion if her addressee asks for them. The term “deontic attitude” means in Brandom’s theory a person’s attitude of taking an asserter to be committed or entitled. Thus, for Brandom, assertions serve as reasons and they allow further inferences (Brandom 1994, 157 – 168). That is the human practice Brandom is interested in. For the addressee, assertions are commitments whose reasons she is allowed to ask the asserter, who, for her part, is responsible for giving reasons. Because the asserter as well as the addressee may use those assertions as reasons for further inferences, all assertions are testimonies, even if the authority and the responsibility that come along with the assertion may vary.

Brandom does not think that norms can be presented as explicit rules which humans would follow. He also denies, as was stated above, that norms would basically be regularities of behavior. Therefore, it seems to be the speaker and the addressee that apply and interpret norms in particular situations. The ethical framework that Brandom gives is general; hence, he is Peircean in his interest in the general patterns in which assertions are located. However, he is Jamesian in his emphasis on the particular encounters and the attitudes of the asserter and the addressee. For Brandom, the pragmatist, assertions are connected with social practices, and those practices allow description by means of deontic vocabulary. Still, what is irreducible in his analysis is the persons’ attitude and their encounters, and that brings in the element of particularity in his use of the pragmatic method. The normative attitude need not be propositional and it may even include evaluation of the speaker’s moral virtues, as I have argued earlier (Haaparanta 2018).

Pihlström’s Jamesian method

I mentioned above that Pihlström favors the Jamesian view on the pragmatic method. That means, among other things, that the consequences that Pihlström is interested in are particular, hence, an abstract theory or a philosophical view must be evaluated in terms of particular events in the world and the actions of individuals; the general scheme of an action is not sufficient. However, more can be said of the steps between the general view and the practical consequences. Pihlström’s intention is not to focus on mechanical rules or inference schemes that would reveal the steps. He does not argue that the use of the pragmatic method is to follow given rules of moving from the general to

the particular, for example, from a metaphysical theory to those actual morally laudable or blamable deeds or activity. That kind of guidebook for using the pragmatic method would be against the pragmatic spirit, because it would try to present a general scheme applicable to every instance of pragmatic evaluation. Still, something should be said about the use of the method, and that is exactly what Pihlström does in his book. His main interest is in ethical consequences of our acting on a theory. Beliefs are “tested in the laboratory of life” (Pihlström 2008, 38). The question now arises how a Jamesian pragmatist connects a general philosophical view to its practical *ethical* consequences. Pihlström states that the pragmatic maxim is not “a precursor of the positivist repudiation of metaphysics”; instead, it is “a method to be used precisely in order to find out what the practical, ethically relevant core of metaphysical issues is” (*ibid.*, 15).

If the similarities of the transcendental argument and the Jamesian pragmatic method are emphasized and the pragmatist’s argument is thus expressed in words, actual human life that the argument starts with must be described in the vocabulary that is available to the philosopher in everyday life. That description of human practice is not morally neutral; on the contrary, it includes moral vocabulary. As Pihlström states, “it is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms” (*ibid.*, 45). However, the description is not about actual human life with its evils: what is required is a description of practice that is morally desired and valuable. Therefore, actuality is ideality for the philosopher who is a member of the given community, perhaps the community of all human beings, and who recognizes and is able to express shared values. It is from this starting-point that the method proceeds to the necessary conditions of the possibility of that kind of morally good practice. Pihlström states that it is a field of commitments or a form of life (*ibid.*, 49).

For Pihlström, metaphysics has an ethical basis (*ibid.*, 59). That somewhat surprising view becomes less surprising if we take into account that here metaphysics is not a study of the basic ontological categories that are supposed to have their being independently of the human perspective (*ibid.*, 77). Pihlström seeks to test metaphysical views, such as belief in the immortality of the soul, against human life described in ethical terms. He argues that belief, or hope, which is close to belief here, for immortality should be ethically motivating ideal in this worldly life, if it is given legitimation by means of the pragmatic method. He also argues:

... to find out that a metaphysical position is such that we cannot *live* on the basis of it, or cannot really *believe* it to be true while continuing to engage in the world in the

habitual ways we simply cannot give up (e.g., for ethical reasons), is to find out that it is pragmatically false. This sounds radical but is in fact a direct consequence of the basic pragmatist view that beliefs, including metaphysical beliefs, are habits of action and must be critically evaluated in terms of their potential consequences for action.

(*Ibid.*, 73)

Morality in human practice is implicit; it is not expressed in language. However, a Jamesian pragmatist must assume that it can be generalized to the extent that it can be described in words. For a philosopher, however, there is one more level, namely, the level of the vocabulary of ethical theories, and the competition between those theories. Pihlström denies that pragmatism should be interpreted as a consequentialist position in ethics; instead, he points out that “we may see it as offering a *criterion for the adequacy of any ethical view* in terms of its ability of that view to account for the preciousness of our mortal human life” (*ibid.*, 85). Hence, a Jamesian pragmatist should test ethical theories as well as metaphysical theories. It seems that such evaluation of ethical theories would not result in defeating any particular theory; it may rather be the case that consequentialism, deontological theory and virtue ethics could live together. Still, I would not argue that pragmatism is instrumentalism about philosophical theories in the sense that it would describe ethical theories as tools that are useful for different purposes.

Concluding Remarks

The use of the pragmatic method as Pihlström describes it is not giving analysis of actual human practice and then moving towards general philosophical views by following given rules of inference. Still, there is the philosopher’s reason at work in the process. The use of the method is continuous evaluation of philosophical views by moving back and forth between the description of particular phenomena or human practice and abstract theories. As for metaphysical theories, pragmatist metaphysics is not analytic metaphysics. Instead, it seems to be closer to phenomenological metaphysics, as it includes descriptions of what phenomenologists would call the world of the natural attitude. It differs from the pure or radically transcendental, even if not from more naturalized, phenomenological philosophies in that no parenthesizing of the natural world is

included in the use of the method. It is always the natural world with its idealities, such as moral values, that is in focus in pragmatism.

As was noted above, Brandom construes human linguistic practice by means of deontological ethical vocabulary. Still, his linguistic pragmatism does not exclude the vocabulary of virtue ethics. Jamesian pragmatist philosophy as Pihlström presents it does not favor one ethical theory and its vocabulary over the other alternatives. What matters is the continuous *moral* evaluation of all abstract philosophical, hence also ethical, views. This feature suggests that even if Jamesian pragmatism does not propose any specific ethical theory, its metaphilosophy is thoroughly ethical. It pays attention to the moral virtues of a philosopher and praises practical wisdom over other forms of human rationality. That is also essential to Pihlström's way of applying the pragmatic method, which is not regulated by explicit rules, but illuminated by various examples.

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