# *Maxim of Pragmatism*

1878 | How to Make Our Ideas Clear | CP 5.402

It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.

1893 | Grand Logic 1893: Methodology. The Doctrine of Definition and Division. Chapter XVI. Clearness of Apprehension | CP 5.402n2

It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." - A note, 1893: "Before we undertake to apply this rule, let us reflect a little upon what it implies. It has been said to be a sceptical and materialistic principle. But it is only an application of the sole principle of logic which was recommended by Jesus; "Ye may know them by their fruits," and it is very intimately allied with the ideas of the gospel. We must certainly guard ourselves against understanding this rule in too individualistic a sense. To say that man accomplishes nothing but that to which his endeavors are directed would be a cruel condemnation of the great bulk of mankind, who never have leisure to labor for anything but the necessities of life for themselves and their families. But, without directly striving for it, far less comprehending it, they perform all that civilization requires, and bring forth another generation to advance history another step. Their fruit is, therefore, collective; it is the achievement of the whole people. What is it, then, that the whole people is about, what is this civilization that is the outcome of history, but is never completed? We cannot expect to attain a complete conception of it; but we can see that it is a gradual process, that it involves a realization of ideas in man's consciousness and in his works, and that it takes place by virtue of man's capacity for learning, and by experience continually pouring upon him ideas he has not yet acquired.

1902 | Pragmatic and Pragmatism | CP 5.2-3

The opinion that metaphysics is to be largely cleared up by the application of the following maxim for attaining clearness of apprehension: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." [—]

This maxim was first proposed by C.S. Peirce in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January, 1878 (xii. 287); and he explained how it was to be applied to the doctrine of reality. The writer was led to the maxim by reflection upon Kant's *Critic of the Pure Reason*. Substantially the same way of dealing with ontology seems to have been practised by the Stoics. The writer subsequently saw that the principle might easily be misapplied, so as to sweep away the whole doctrine of incommensurables, and, in fact, the whole Weierstrassian way of regarding the calculus. In 1896 William James published his *Will to*

*Believe*, and later his *Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results*, which pushed this method to such extremes as must tend to give us pause. The doctrine appears to assume that the end of man is action – a stoical axiom which, to the present writer at the age of sixty, does not recommend itself so forcibly as it did at thirty. If it be admitted, on the contrary, that action wants an end, and that that end must be something of a general description, then the spirit of the maxim itself, which is that we must look to the upshot of our concepts in order rightly to apprehend them, would direct us towards something different from practical facts, namely, to general ideas, as the true interpreters of our thought. Nevertheless, the maxim has approved itself to the writer, after many years of trial, as of great utility in leading to a relatively high grade of clearness of thought. He would venture to suggest that it should always be put into practice with conscientious thoroughness, but that, when that has been done, and not before, a still higher grade of clearness of thought can be attained by remembering that the only ultimate good which the practical facts to which it directs attention can subserve is to further the development of concrete reasonableness; so that the meaning of the concept does not lie in any individual reactions at all, but in the manner in which those reactions contribute to that development. Indeed, in the article of 1878, above referred to, the writer practised better than he preached; for he applied the stoical most unstoically, in such a sense as to insist upon the reality of the objects of general ideas in their generality.

1903 | Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism: Lecture I | CP 5.18

On their side, one of the faults that I think they might find with me is that I make pragmatism to be a mere maxim of logic instead of a sublime principle of speculative philosophy. In order to be admitted to better philosophical standing I have endeavored to put pragmatism as I understand it into the same form of a philosophical theorem. I have not succeeded any better than this:

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood.

But the Maxim of Pragmatism, as I originally stated it, *Revue philosophique* VII, is as follows:

Considérer quels sont les effets pratiques que nous pensons pouvoir être produits par l'objet de notre conception. La conception de tous ces effets est la conception complète de l'objet. [p. 48.]

Pour développer le sens d'une pensée, il faut donc simplement déterminer quelles habitudes elle produit, car le sens d'une chose consiste simplement dans les habitudes qu'elle implique. Le caractère d'une habitude dépend de la façon dont elle peut nous faire agir non pas seulement dans telle circonstance probable, mais dans toute circonstance possible, si improbable qu'elle puisse être. Ce qu'est une habitude dépend de ces deux points: quand et comment elle fait agir. Pour le premier point: quand? tout stimulant à l'action dérive d'une perception; pour le second point: comment? le but de toute action est d'amener au résultat sensible. Nous atteignons ainsi le tangible et le pratique comme base de toute différence de pensée, si subtile qu'elle puisse être. [p. 47.]

1903 | Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism: Lecture VII, a deleted passage | CP 5.212

Pragmatism will be more essentially significant for him than for any other logician, for the reason that it is in action that logical energy returns to the uncontrolled and uncriticizable parts of the mind. His maxim will be this:

The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and whatever cannot show its passports at both those two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason.

1903 | Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism: Lecture VII, a deleted passage | CP 5.196

If you carefully consider the question of pragmatism you will see that it is nothing else than the question of the logic of abduction. That is, pragmatism proposes a certain maxim which, if sound, must render needless any further rule as to the admissibility of hypotheses to rank as hypotheses, that is to say, as explanations of phenomena held as hopeful suggestions; and, furthermore, this is *all* that the maxim of pragmatism really pretends to do, at least so far as it is confined to logic, and is not understood as a proposition in psychology. For the maxim of pragmatism is that a conception can have no logical effect or import differing from that of a second conception except so far as, taken in connection with other conceptions and intentions, it might conceivably modify our practical conduct differently from that second conception.

1903 | Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism: Lecture II | EP 2:145; MS [R] 305:1

Pragmatism [was considered] as the maxim that the entire meaning and significance of any conception lies in its *conceivable* practical bearings, – not certainly altogether in consequences that would influence our conduct so far as we can foresee our future circumstances but which in *conceivable* circumstances would go to determine how we should deliberately act, and how we should act in a practical way and not merely how we should act as affirming or denying the conception to be cleared up.

1904 | A Brief Intellectual Autobiography by Charles Sanders Peirce | Peirce, 1983, pp. 66-67; MS [R] L107:7-8

...the principle he called *pragmatism*, that is, that every concept (in contrast to qualities of feeling, images, experiences, etc.) is definable in terms of a possible purpose of conduct under hypothetical general conditions, and that from this can be deduced the best rule for rendering ideas clear, namely, “Consider what effects that *might conceivably* have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have: then, our concept of those effects is the *whole* concept in question.” But since P not only admits the difference between a commensurable and an incommensurable length, but has specially insisted upon abnumerable (abzählbar) multitudes [...] it is evident that he understands “conceivably practical bearings” in a peculiarly wide sense.

This quote has been taken from Kenneth Laine Ketner's 1983 reconstruction of Peirce's 'Autobiography'

1904 [c.] | Draft of Nichols Review [C] | CP 8.191

The word *pragmatism* was invented to express a certain maxim of logic, which, as was shown at its first enouncement, involves a whole system of philosophy. The maxim is intended to furnish a method for the analysis of concepts. A concept is something having the mode of being of a general type which is, or may be made, the rational part of the purport of a word. A more precise or fuller definition cannot here be attempted. The method prescribed in the maxim is to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences, – that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct, – of the affirmation or denial of the concept; and the assertion of the maxim is that herein lies the *whole* of the purport of the word, the *entire* concept. The sedulous exclusion from this statement of all reference to sensation is specially to be remarked. Such a distinction as that between red and blue is held to form no part of the concept. This maxim is put forth neither as a handy tool to serve so far as it may be found serviceable, nor as a self-evident truth, but as a far-reaching theorem solidly grounded upon an elaborate study of the nature of signs.

1905 | Issues of Pragmaticism | CP 5.438

Pragmaticism was originally enounced in the form of a maxim, as follows: Consider what effects that might *conceivably* have practical bearings you *conceive* the objects of your *conception* to have. Then, your *conception* of those effects is the whole of your *conception* of the object.

I will restate this in other words, since ofttimes one can thus eliminate some unsuspected source of perplexity to the reader. This time it shall be in the indicative mood, as follows: The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol.

1905 | Issues of Pragmaticism | CP 5.441

According to the maxim of Pragmaticism, to say that determination affects our occult nature is to say that it is capable of affecting deliberate conduct; and since we are conscious of what we do deliberately, we are conscious habitualiter of whatever hides in the depths of our nature; and it is presumable (and only presumable, although curious instances are on record), that a sufficiently energetic effort of attention would bring it out.

1905 | Issues of Pragmaticism | CP 5.402n3

[It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.] Note that in these three lines one finds, “conceivably,” “conceive,” “conception,” “conception,”

"conception." Now I find there are many people who detect the authorship of my unsigned screeds; and I doubt not that one of the marks of my style by which they do so is my inordinate reluctance to repeat a word. This employment five times over of derivates of *concipere* must then have had a purpose. In point of fact it had two. One was to show that I was speaking of meaning in no other sense than that of *intellectual purport*. The other was to avoid all danger of being understood as attempting to explain a concept by percepts, images, schemata, or by anything but concepts. I did not, therefore, mean to say that acts, which are more strictly singular than anything, could constitute the purport, or adequate proper interpretation, of any symbol. I compared action to the finale of the symphony of thought, belief being a demi-cadence. Nobody conceives that the few bars at the end of a musical movement are the *purpose* of the movement. They may be called its upshot. But the figure obviously would not bear detailed application. I only mention it to show that the suspicion I myself expressed (Baldwin's *Dictionary* Article, *Pragmatism*) after a too hasty rereading of the forgotten magazine paper, that it expressed a stoic, that is, a nominalistic, materialistic, and utterly philistine state of thought, was quite mistaken.

No doubt, Pragmaticism makes thought ultimately *apply* to action exclusively – to *conceived* action. But between admitting that and either saying that it makes thought, in the sense of the purport of symbols, to consist in acts, or saying that the true ultimate purpose of thinking is action, there is much the same difference as there is between saying that the artist-painter's living art is applied to dabbing paint upon canvas, and saying that that art-life consists in dabbing paint, or that its ultimate aim is dabbing paint. Pragmaticism makes thinking to consist in the living inferential metaboly of symbols whose purport lies in conditional general resolutions to act. As for the ultimate purpose of thought, which must be the purpose of everything, it is beyond human comprehension; but according to the stage of approach which my thought has made to it – with aid from many persons, among whom I may mention Royce (in his *World and Individual*), Schiller (in his *Riddles of the Sphinx*) as well, by the way, as the famous poet [Friedrich Schiller] (in his *Aesthetische Briefe*), Henry James the elder (in his *Substance and Shadow* and in his conversations), together with Swedenborg himself – it is by the indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control that the *vir* is begotten, and by action, through thought, he grows an esthetic ideal, not for the behoof of his own poor noddle merely, but as the share which God permits him to have in the work of creation.

This ideal, by modifying the rules of self-control modifies action, and so experience too – both the man's own and that of others, and this centrifugal movement thus rebounds in a new centripetal movement, and so on; and the whole is a bit of what has been going on, we may presume, for a time in comparison with which the sum of the geological ages is as the surface of an electron in comparison with that of a planet.

1907 | Pragmatism | MS [R] 318:12-16; CP 5.467-8

...the total meaning of the predication of an intellectual concept is contained in an affirmation that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, (or under this or that more or less indefinite part of the cases of their fulfillment, should the predication be modal,) the subject of the predication would behave in a certain general way, – that is, it would be true under given experiential circumstances (or under a more or less definitely stated proportion of them, *taken as they would occur*, that is in the same order of succession, *in experience*).

A most pregnant principle, quite undeniably, will this "kernel of pragmatism" prove to be, that the *whole* meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen, once in so

often, in the course of experience, under certain kinds of existential conditions, – provided it can be proved to be true.

1907 | Pragmatism | EP 2:402; MS [R] 318:12

...that the *total* meaning of the predication of an intellectual concept consists in affirming that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, the subject of the predication would (or would not) behave in a certain way, – that is, that it either would, or would not, be true that under given experiential circumstances (or under a given proportion of them, taken *as they would occur* in experience) certain facts would exist, – *that* proposition I take to be the kernel of pragmatism. More simply stated, the whole meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen, once in so often in the course of experience, under certain kinds of existential circumstances.

At least a part of this passage appears to have been discarded by Peirce

1907 | Pragmatism | MS [R] 318:22

Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have: then the general mental habit that consists in the production of these effects is the whole meaning of your concept.

1907 [c.] | Prag [R] | MS [R] 322:11-12

Consider what effects that *might conceivably* have practical bearings, – especially in modifying habits or as implying capacities, – you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your (interpretational) conception of those effects is the whole (meaning of) your conception of the object.

According to Peirce, the words between the dashes and in the parentheses are additions meant to clarify the original maxim.

1907 [c.] | (Prag) [R] | CP 5.8-9

But pragmatism does not undertake to say in what the meanings of all signs consist, but merely to lay down a method of determining the meanings of intellectual concepts, that is, of those upon which reasonings may turn.

[—] Such reasonings and all reasonings turn upon the idea that if one exerts certain kinds of volition, one will undergo in return certain compulsory perceptions. Hence is justified the maxim, belief in which constitutes pragmatism; namely,

*In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception.*

1908 | A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God (O) | CP 6.481-482

Since I have employed the word *Pragmaticism*, and shall have occasion to use it once more, it may perhaps be well to explain it. About forty years ago, my studies of Berkeley, Kant, and others led me, after convincing myself that all thinking is performed in Signs, and that meditation takes the form of a dialogue, so that it is proper to speak of the "meaning" of a concept, to conclude that to acquire full mastery of that meaning it is requisite, in the first place, to learn to recognize the concept under every disguise, through extensive familiarity with instances of it. But this, after all, does not imply any true understanding of it; so that it is further requisite that we should make an abstract logical analysis of it into its ultimate elements, or as complete an analysis as we can compass. But, even so, we may still be without any living comprehension of it; and the only way to complete our knowledge of its nature is to discover and recognize just what general habits of conduct a belief in the truth of the concept (of any conceivable subject, and under any conceivable circumstances) would reasonably develop; that is to say, what habits would ultimately result from a sufficient consideration of such truth. It is necessary to understand the word "conduct," here, in the broadest sense. If, for example, the predication of a given concept were to lead to our admitting that a given form of reasoning concerning the subject of which it was affirmed was valid, when it would not otherwise be valid, the recognition of that effect in our reasoning would decidedly be a habit of conduct.

In 1871, in a Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I used to preach this principle as a sort of logical gospel, representing the unformulated method followed by Berkeley, and in conversation about it I called it "Pragmatism." In December [November] 1877 and January 1878 I set forth the doctrine in the *Popular Science Monthly*; and the two parts of my essay were printed in French in the *Revue Philosophique*, volumes vi and vii. Of course, the doctrine attracted no particular attention, for, as I had remarked in my opening sentence, very few people care for logic. But in 1897 Professor James remodelled the matter, and transmogrified it into a doctrine of philosophy, some parts of which I highly approved, while other and more prominent parts I regarded, and still regard, as opposed to sound logic. About the time Professor Papini discovered, to the delight of the Pragmatist school, that this doctrine was incapable of definition, which would certainly seem to distinguish it from every other doctrine in whatever branch of science, I was coming to the conclusion that my poor little maxim should be called by another name; and accordingly, in April, 1905 I renamed it *Pragmaticism*.

1910 [c.] | Additament to the Article A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God | CP 6.490

According to that logical doctrine which the present writer first formulated in 1873 and named Pragmatism, the true meaning of any product of the intellect lies in whatever unitary determination it would impart to practical conduct under any and every conceivable circumstance, supposing such conduct to be guided by reflexion carried to an ultimate limit. It appears to have been virtually the philosophy of Socrates. But although it is "an old way of thinking," in the sense that it was practiced by Spinoza, Berkeley, and Kant, I am not aware of its having been definitely formulated, whether as a maxim of logical analysis or otherwise, by anybody before my publication of it in 1878. [—] It did not,

however, shine with its present effulgence until Professor Papini made the discovery that it cannot be defined - a circumstance which, I believe, distinguishes it from all other doctrines, of whatsoever natures they may be, that were ever promulgated. Thereupon I thought it high time to give my method a less distinguished designation; and I rechristened it *pragmaticism*. Pragmaticism, then, is a theory of logical analysis, or true definition; and its merits are greatest in its application to the highest metaphysical conceptions.