

# PRAGMATISM AND SEMIOTICS: THE THIRD WAY.

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Pragmatism, as William James used to write by taking up an idea worked out by Papini, is like a passageway corridor between philosophical schools, precisely one on which many rooms overlook. In one of them you can see a man praying, in the other a thinker who actively champions independence of thought, in another one a defender of philosophical naturalism, in the latter an anti-reductionist. There are some who commit themselves to demonstrating the ineludible realism of ontological beings, and others who, unlike the former, subscribe to perspectival hypotheses, “but they all own the corridor, and all must pass through if they want a practicable way of getting into our out of their respective rooms”<sup>1</sup>.

The many faces of Pragmatism provide wide enough evidence of the multifarious inspiration of the Pragmatist attitude of thought: I would define it precisely in this way, namely as an attitude – or a method, as Peirce preferred to look at it – and not properly as a theory, because the Pragmatist inspiration in the field of intellectual practice, on the whole, sums up some features which keep it neatly distinct from other conceptual elaborations and make it an *unicum* in the twentieth-century cultural landscape, and in the present one.

In this paper I shall briefly try to clarify its most prominent aspects, those who I take to be particularly stimulating and, most importantly, those who maximally deal with the themes of our session: Language, Signs, and Dialogue. First and foremost, the central element bears on the concern addressed to the *outcome* of actions, whether practical or theoretical, with respect to the first *causes*, the *origins*, *principles*. By their fruit you will recognize them, as Peirce used to say by appealing to an evangelical maxim. Which is tantamount to saying: what really matters are the *effects* of truth, not the truths discovered thanks to the patient labor of reason. Its effects are patently “on the road” - in the long run, as Peirce said - whose final destination cannot be seen by any of us. Misrecognition of the importance of origins –for the origin is always, so to speak, a retroactive effect of the thought which authoritatively situates it within a given time and a given place - means to defuse as much as possible intentionality, responsibility, will and, generally speaking, the whole equipment of conscience and subjective introspection. Of course, not in every Pragmatist “room” one thinks this way; still, if we tease out the most radical consequences of such a theoretical exercise and think it

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<sup>1</sup> W. James, *Pragmatism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 1979 [first ed. 1975], p.32.

over as connected to some of the most original contemporary hypotheses, this is a truly poignant consequence of the theory, one still to be completely worked out.

Truth, then, can be only thought of as the outcome framed by the different modes of action developed within public and communal praxis. A central place is attached to *action*, with no possibility of referring to a *subject* of action. "There is no such substrate, there is no "being" behind the doing, acting, becoming. "The doer" is merely invented after the fact - the act is everything". These are the words of a *sui generis* Pragmatist, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose formulations would perhaps be understood in our Congress and interpreted according to new perspectives. However, if a central role is assigned to *praxis in actu* and such a praxis is anonymous, Peirce would add that it belongs to the community which turns it into truth and reiterates it by confirming it at every single step. In fact, already in the early years of his academic career, Peirce comes to an idea of reality as the outcome of the active-interpretive *long run* (that is, the pragmatic-semiotic *long run*), warranted by the community consent, that is to say, by the public character of the habits of response. Notably, in the conclusive phase of his own production, James does not hesitate to speak of cognitive activity in terms of creative activity, that is, one which does not find 'out there' a ready-to-hand reality, but produces it, chooses it, moulds it. "We receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves"<sup>2</sup>. In a similar fashion, Royce insists on the worth of the community's interpretive construction, thinking of community as an organism in a process of growth which acquires customs, poses values, identifies objects of reference, one which is weak or powerful depending on the experiences it undergoes.

I maintain that even such an idea, which I would define 'communitarian realism', is one of particular relevance in the current debate, the latter being run through by new questions on the statute of reality and the legitimacy of the interpretations that can be offered about it. A hundred years ago, Peirce and Royce had already solved the problem in the following way: the logic of investigation needs a notion of 'real being' able to offer itself to the scientific and theoretical discovery in the shape of sign, that is, as meaningful reference *for* an Interpretant who collects it. Such a sign, moreover, is considered as true in a public dimension of beliefs: logic has therefore an eminently ethical ground, as its assertion presuppose "faith" in an indefinite community, the conviction that such an interest is superior to any other and the hope in the unlimited continuation of the activity of discovery. To look at the issue carefully, it is not a matter either of realism or of anti-realism (or, even worse,

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<sup>2</sup> W. James, *Pragmatism*, cit., p. 119.

of the ‘infamous’ relativism). Even in this respect the Pragmatist stance, particularly in its semiotic declension, has always pursued the one which I would define a third way, between the shoals of Materialism and those of Idealism. According to James’ successful definition, facts determine our beliefs, but such beliefs bring us to action and produce new facts which redefine our previous beliefs. “The whole coil and ball of truth”, in its getting unraveled, is the offspring of this double influence: “Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truths (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The ‘facts’ themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them”<sup>3</sup>. Facts are the producers and, all the same, the products of beliefs around the facts; they are functions of the practices enacted to attain the truth or, as James himself on several occasions maintains, a measure of the concern we address to them.

This category of “concern”, or interest, is another element on which it is worth pausing while introducing the Pragmatistic hypothesis. As it is well known, it deeply characterizes the “revolution” accomplished by this thought that strove to confirm the idea that only on the basis of an active and operative interest the worlds discloses itself to the knowing subject. As a bright author of our times writes – notably without ever mentioning Pragmatism - “through the apparently innocuous term ‘interest’ – which since the 17<sup>th</sup> century has been the secular name for passions – the catastrophe of pure theory was sealed”<sup>4</sup>. The purity of the theory had for a long time been experienced as a sort of ascesis of thought: in the exercise of a rigorous method, the philosopher proceeded to the extinction of himself and of his own standpoint, and in the conquest of an objectivity purified by any personal “pollution” was ultimately celebrated the splendor of a very peculiar interest: the one of the objectivizing lack of subjective interest. We often tend to forget that, long before the current of contemporary hermeneutics began to flow, Peirce, James, Dewey and many of their followers had well clarified that the rigor, the logic, the clarity claimed by the epistemic statements were nothing but habits of response particularly suited to the configuration of the world established by scientific practices, but by no means unassailable principles of research and reflection. In sum, they had well clarified that even such statements were accompanied by an original affectivity leading researchers to be strongly and fideistically *attached* to the ascetic form of methodical *detachment*.

It is not possible, then, either to have an ‘uninterested’ relation with ‘things-in-themselves’ or to actualize the retreat on the very high mountain of pure

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<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p 107-8.

<sup>4</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Stato di morte apparente*, Cortina, Milano 2011, p. 145. My own translation.

intuition: philosophy is a tool needed to take position in the banquet of life, not one enabling to ascend to a panoramic point of view and better see what happens. Pragmatism has never been a philosophical “vision”, but a method, as pointed out before, precisely in the Greek sense of the *meth’odos*, a road which traverses a place and traces a path – not a contemplation alien to daily matters, but a gymnic-paideutic<sup>5</sup> accompaniment for the day and a form of constantly putting different practical perspectives to the test. The phenomena it deals with are *pragmata* and, as Heidegger recalls, the Greeks named things *pragmata* precisely to indicate that which one has to do with in one’s concerned dealings or praxis.

As we might notice, it is a matter of a position that contrasts starkly with the *epoché*, whatever form it may take, from Descartes to Husserl. Peirce openly supports it: the Pragmatistic method assumes from the start the whole amount of our pre-judices, which, even if we wished, cannot be suspended. Should we let them overwhelm us? Of course not: we have to see them as signs who relate to other signs, and we must also learn how to swim into the current of the infinite semiosis. We have to accept that theory will never be ‘pure’, that purification is not even to be wished, that an ‘active life’, on the whole, is a life ‘contaminated’ by the having-to-do and by the being-ready-to-do or prepared-to-act (Peirce and Bain), as a life in which interpretation and action offer themselves as an *unicum* and in which the truths are exerted *until* they can be exerted, and suspended only when a real stumbling block questions them.

For this and other reasons, the Phenomenological method and the Pragmatic-semiological one – despite the existence of authoritative texts which try to prove the opposite – will never be approachable in their fundamentals. According to Peirce, forefather of the second trend (which still used to speak about Phenomenology), what offers itself to conscience “can make itself present only by presenting itself again through *representamen*”, namely through signs. They can “present an object and make it re-emerge as such as a phenomenon only by presenting it again through an Interpretant sign, one which owns in itself a constitutively discursive essence (it ‘says’). It is precisely through this discursive essence - which projects on the object a series of previous forms of knowledge achieved in its absence (the Interpretants) – that the sign is able to enlighten its object under a certain respect. *Each and every presentation goes through interpretant re-presentations*”<sup>6</sup>. Anti-intuitionism in Peirce means precisely antithesis to an eidetic vision grounded on evidence: the sign and discursive inference situates itself in a totally different field with

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<sup>5</sup> Gymnastics stems from the Greek *gymnazein*, which means “to train oneself”. On paidetic athropo-technique see once again P. Sloterdijk, *op.cit. passim*.

<sup>6</sup> C. Paolucci, *Strutturalismo e interpretazione*, Bompiani, Milano 2010, p. 194. My own translation.

respect to the vision of essences, which shows what gives itself in a crystalline and doubtless way and does not entrust itself to future interpretations by referring to signs which signify *in absentia*. It is with regard to these aspects (and maybe less with regard to others) that Pragmatism, with its semiotic groundings, radically departs from the Phenomenological perspective and offers a path that can be traversed in an alternative way, one in many aspects original with respect to the mainstream of Continental philosophy. Nevertheless, it steadily departs even from the analytic one for equally compelling reasons. I shall recall here just one, in the wake of the previous speech: if it is true that the worship of logical precision, as we were saying before, leads not so much to the demonstrability and the coherence of a certain argument, but to the interest for the field of unshakeable grounds exerted by the one who exposes it, then the appeals to the tightness of arguments, to clarity and evidence, remain metaphysical appeals which little show to have understood by the master of the analysis of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein. He was perhaps, after Peirce, the first to appeal precisely to the vagueness of praxis and to its many infinite and morphologically varied discursive configurations, to fight against the thesis that “where there is sense, there must be perfect order”<sup>7</sup>. If, beyond the Phenomenological gaze, Pragmatism is an active defender of the semiotic inference rather than of eidetic evidence, the sign to which it refers is not solely the one of language, even less the one of logical-formal language. It is rather a matter of interpretant practices connected with the habits of response through which we walk in the world; it is a matter of ethical choices, that is, again, of practical consequences; and, considering all this, it is still a matter of Logic, as Peirce took it, which is what, being grounded in Phenomenology, Aesthetics and Ethics, conduces to a thought and to a conduct deliberated and self-controlled. Finally, Pragmatism does not refer to action as the *summum bonum*, but to the understanding of those *generals* that incarnate themselves in the body of community and that constitute a social Self.

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<sup>7</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P.M.S Hacker and J. Schulte. Tr. By G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S Hacker and J. Schulte, 2009 [first ed. Blackwell, 1953,] § 98. As the author meaningfully goes on: “For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had *discovered*: it was a requirement” (§ 107).