

Pragmatism and Extended Mind: The Question of Meaning

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In many aspects, admittedly, pragmatism incorporates a criticism of representationalism regarding the relation between mind and world. In philosophy of mind and cognitive science, particularly, representationalism corresponds to the view that “there are states of the mind which function to encode states of the world” (Chemero, 2009, p. 17). In direct opposition to representationalism, we find ‘views of the sort defended by American pragmatists’ (Chemero, 2009, p.8). In James’s pragmatism, for instance, a criticism of representationalism is notoriously present: “representative theories put a mental ‘representation’, ‘image,’ or ‘content’ into the gap, as a sort of intermediary” (James [1907], 1978, p. 61). In broad terms, accordingly, we can take James’s pragmatism to be a response to representational theories of mind once it deflates the notion of representation as condition for mental states to be meaningful. Regarding the contexts of philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences, certainly, pragmatism consists in a form of anti-representationalism.

Even though the label ‘anti-representationalism’ corresponds to Richard Rorty’s version of neo-pragmatism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* ([1979] 2009), in which he denies that language is not “about” anything at all (Eldridge; Pihlström, 2011, p. 29), such way of thinking roots back to the origin of pragmatism. In *How to Make our Ideas Clear* ([1878] 1966, p. 122-3), Peirce posits that “thought is an *action* [and] every purpose of action is to produce some sensible result. Thus, we come down to what is tangible and practical as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice”. In *What pragmatism means* ([1907] 2000, p. 25), William James reaffirms Peirce’s pragmatic maxim: “Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are rules for action, said that to develop a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance”. Despite the difference that Peirce’s pragmatic maxim stands for the logical criteria for fixing the meaning of concepts and that for James it acquires a psychological sense in the human life, arguably, both have in common that meaning refers to action and practical effects.

Taking into account the pragmatic maxim, accordingly, we are very far from the analytical tradition in which meaning refers mostly to the concepts of extension, denotation, reference, correspondence, and representation. I agree with Floyd Merrell (p. 1997, ix) when he asserts that “meaning is nowhere and at the same time it is everywhere”. And surely Hilary Putnam (1975, p. 216) is right by contending if meaning exists, it does not exist in way we usually think it does. Regarding the pragmatic maxim in comparison with Merrell and Putnam’s views, here the methodological strategy is to put away the conception of meaning as correspondence, representation and reference. What I have in mind is to make use of the pragmatic maxim and to get forward the idea that once meaning refers to action and practices, it consists in an extended process in a variety of contexts (linguistic, social, cultural, historical, and affective contexts). My thesis is quite simple: the question of meaning should be a core point for a substantial understanding of mentality (e.g. cognition, behavior, communication, affection and *qualia*). For an organism to be regarded as endowing of mentality, supposedly, it must be able to perform meaning activity as indicating *meaning-making* process.

The main idea that I will exploit here is the contribution of pragmatism to the question of meaning regarding the contexts of extended mind (Clark; Chalmers, 1998; Rupert, 2009,

Rowlands, 2010, Clark, 2011). In his conception of pragmatism, clearly, James develops a theory of meaning by stressing that the significance of thought lies in the action to which it leads. In James's conception of pragmatism, accordingly, it makes explicit a form of anti-representationalism. As meaning refers to action and practical effects, for James, it is not dependent on the so-called mental representation, which stands for a core concept in the traditional cognitive science, as context-free content. In parallel with the notion of extended mind and the idea that that mind is not "in the head" and can extend outside the body in continuity with organism's environment (Madzia; Jung, 2016; Määttänen, 2015), pragmatically, meaning is taken to be an extended process emerging from a situated context (natural, social, historical or affective contexts). Being a sort of background, in particular, context amounts to the environmental aspects that are incorporated into the transactional process between organism and world – in a similar way, in the words of Gregory Bateson (1979, p. 14), 'nothing has meaning except it be seen as in some context [...] And "context" is linked to another undefined notion called "meaning"'.

According to Lakoff; Johnson (1999, p. 101) and Johnson (2017, p. 18-9), differently from the 'first generation of disembodied cognitive science', an 'embodied second generation of embodied cognitive' is 'essentially pragmatist in character' once meaning is regarded as a process grounded on actions and practices contextually situated. As well posited by Mark Johnson (2017, p. 24), for instance, 'to know the meaning of chair, to understand what a chair is in a certain context, is to simulate experiences with chairs using all the sensory, motor, and affective modalities available to us'. Once meaning is grounded on social and historical situated contexts, interestingly, pragmatism moves toward the philosophy of ordinary language represented by the latter Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle and John L. Austin. In this sense, when we are speaking of meaning in language, for instance, we are speaking of 'activity' or 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein, PI, 23) – that is, meaning is not identified with objective content of thought and context-free. In line with Wittgenstein's theory of use, interestingly, Ryle (1961, p. 229) states that "don't ask for the meaning; ask for the use". Echoing Wittgenstein and Ryle, Austin (1962, p. 3) stresses on the multiple uses of language. In our everyday uses of language, we are engaged in doing things – for Austin, such a practical use of language corresponds to its performative domain. Tracing a parallel between the pragmatic maxim of Peirce and James and the theory of (meaning as) use, it suggests an understanding more realistic of the way we engage linguistically with our material, social and cultural environments.

In the sense that in James's pragmatism meaning refers to action and practical effects, arguably, it can be best translated into activity and forms of life. Thinking in a pragmatic way, indeed, we can speak of meaning as process. In the seminal chapter *The Stream of Thought* in *The Principle of Psychology*, by anticipating the pragmatic principle that meaning depends on practical effects, James ([1890] 1983, p. 250) makes explicit a process-thought on meaning: "For the important thing about a train of thought is its conclusion. That is the meaning, or, as we say, the topic of the thought". Additionally, for James, the 'meaning' of a word taken dynamically in a sentence becomes quite different when taken statically or without context. In 'Columbus discovered America in 1492', for instance, the meaning lies in the entire sentence neither more nor less. By criticizing the associationist psychology, indeed, James argues that the meaning of 'Columbus discovered America in 1492' cannot be reduced to individual ideas such as 'Columbus', 'America' or 'the discovery of America'. In recent representational theories of mind, interestingly, the associationist psychology gets a renewed form (e.g. cognitivism and computationalism) in that meaning is supposed to be dependent on mental representation as a sort of meaningless formal symbols and governed by the rules of formal logic. Instead of such understanding, pragmatically, meaning acquires ecological sense

as being an extended process socially and historically situated. Differently from the understanding that meaning corresponds to an objective content and context-free, pragmatically, it is supposed to be value-laden once it refers to action and practical effects in organism's transactions with specific environments.

Alternatively to the methodological individualism and internalism in philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences, at least in according with Peirce and James's pragmatic maxim, the contribution of pragmatism to philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences is to reaffirm the conception of *meaning* as essentially *process*. Taking into account Whitehead's ontology, for instance, the idea of meaning *as* process deflates representationalism: being process, meaning is not about anything – it just flows. But, in this case, the question is: being a process, how long does meaning last? Being dynamically (extended) process, meaning lasts and acquires some degree of stability when the course of an action reaches a level of *relevance* in organism's (natural, social, historical or affective) context. In the case of a linguistic context, particularly, the whole idea can be very well depicted by the dialogical process of speech circuit as model of 'participatory meaning-making' (Cuffari; Di Paolo; De Jaegher, 2014). In such a process, accordingly, it is fair to say that meaning is always a work in progress and so essentially incomplete.

Employing the terminology of the neurophysiologist Andreas K. Engel and colleagues' terminology (2013), in many fields of philosophy, psychology and cognitive neuroscience, undoubtedly, we have witnessed a 'pragmatic turn' – that is, the move from representation to action. The main idea is that 'cognition is a form of practice' (*pace* James and Wittgenstein). And it is a practice in the sense of being the activity of generating structures by action based on organism's sensory-motor capacity in interaction with specific environments (and not by representation resulting of organism's internal dynamics). In the sense of a pragmatic turn, particularly, it makes explicit the fact that meaning is grounded on the context of action. Employing the notion of action, indeed, it is rather the idea of 'intentional action' than just a physical movement as indicating the engagement in the world as meaning-making process.

If James's pragmatism teaches us a lesson, it is that we do not need inner mental entities in order to bridge the supposedly gap between mind and world. For James, indeed, there is no gap at all. As meaning refers to action and practical effects, it develops itself in the *continuum* of experience in that the function of one experience is to lead to another one. In such process, accordingly, meaning emerges from an extended process of constant development between organism and environment. In addition, mind being grounded on organism's a capacity of meaning activity (perceiving, conceptualizing, imagining, reasoning, desiring, willing, dreaming, and so on), it acquires the dynamic form of a transitional process between sensorimotor capacities and physical, social, historical, cultural aspects of the world. In James's conception of pragmatism, indeed, mind is never separate from the body once 'on the principles which I am defending, a 'mind' or 'personal consciousness' is the name for a series of experiences run together by certain definite transitions' (James, [1912] 1996, p. 31) – and as noted by Johnson and Roher (2017, p. 72), comparatively, [mind] is 'always a series of bodily activities immersed in the ongoing flow of organism-environment interactions that constitutes experience'. In a very interesting publication, similarly, Di Paolo and colleagues (2018) present a theoretical framework for an embodied and non-representational view of language aiming at bridging the gap between sensorimotor skills and language – for James, as noted below, it is the case of transition between percepts and concepts.

As final remark concerning James's pragmatism as theory of meaning, I would like to dedicate a brief comment on Harry Heft's paper "*William James' psychology, radical empiricism, and field theory: recent developments*" (2017). In an earlier work, Heft (2001)

traces a parallel between James's radical empiricism and the development of ecological psychology (see also Chemero, 2009). In this recent paper, interestingly, differently from the standard understanding of psychologists on James which is mostly based on *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (1892), in an original way, Hefts explores the notion of 'field' in James's philosophy of radical empiricism.

As James was very educated in the sciences, there is little doubt that he was not aware of the theory of (electromagnetic) field. In this case as noted by Heft (2017, p. 118), 'the electrified wire and the needle, were not bounded, separate entities, but instead they reside in a field of continuous relations that they themselves generate'. In parallel with theory of field, for James, rather than only objects, objects and their relations are equally experienced. In James's sense, accordingly, there is no relation which is not experienced and the relations connecting experiences are themselves experienced relations.

James's understating of experience as continuous process points to that it has no bottom and ultimate layer. Epistemologically speaking, such an understanding of experience commits James's radical empiricism to a form of anti-foundationalism: nothing which is not derived from experience acquires sense of reality or can be know – by knowing, in particular, James means related portions of experience. In his notes for the psychological seminary of 1895-96, interestingly, James describes the immediate data of experience as 'field': 'Fields' that 'develop', under the categories of continuity with each other [categories such as]: sameness and otherness [of] things [or of] thought-streams, fulfilment of one field's meaning in another field's content, 'postulation' of one field by another, cognition of one field by another, etc. (James *apud* Perry, 1976, p. 365). Unfortunately, instead of keeping the term 'field', James preferred to use 'pure' as reference to experience

As also observed by Heft (2017, p. 128), in clear contrast with "the Newtonian-Lockean view that natural phenomena, including mind, are fundamentally composed of discrete units (e.g., ideas)", James claims that experience is essentially a continuous process described as a dynamic field of relations – and being a sort of dynamic field, additionally, experience is not itself a third thing. In occasional moments because of differentiation in the flux of experience, a process of transitions emerges and these transitions are what James (1916, p. 47) designates the continuity between "percepts" ("sensation, feeling, intuition, and sometimes of sensible experience or of the immediate flow of conscious life") and "concepts" ("idea, thought, and intellection"). For James, even though "conception is an *act* and part of the flux of feeling", the transition between percepts and concepts accomplishes a function of connecting parts of experience giving rise to meaning: "each concept means [and] the perceptual flux as such, on the contrary, means nothing" (James, 1916, p. 49). To the extent that the transition from percepts to concepts connects parts of experience, there is no gap in such process as it consists in a series of continuous and conjunctive intermediaries. Tracing a parallel between the notion of extended mind and the pragmatic maxim of James (and Peirce), accordingly, the idea here is that meaning turns into a complex field of relations and differentiations in the flux of experience connecting organism and contextual aspects of the environment.

Additionally, once meaning refers to action and practices as extended process in a variety of contexts (linguistic, social, cultural, historical, and affective contexts), it may be argued that meaning translates itself into a complex field of relations grounded on sensory-motor capacities and environmental aspects. In this sense, I think, meaning acquires a space form and cannot be regarded exclusively a linguistic entity. The idea is not new and, for instance, it is present in the French mathematician René Thom's topology in the 70's as project of approximating geometry and language in *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis* (1975). Thom asserts that geometrical structures are common to all forms of life (including language).

In *Esquisse d'une Sémiophysique [Sketch of a Semiophysics]* (1988), interestingly, René Thom advocates the conception that geometric structures are fields of meaning. In continuation of his theory of catastrophes, incidentally, he reaffirms the project of 'geometrization of language' (Thom, 1988, p.12). As proposed by Thom (1988, p. 11), accordingly, the conception of a 'semiophysics' consists in identifying 'meaningful forms'. In parallel with Thom's conception of semiophysics, for instance, the (bio)semioticians Thomas Sebeok (1979) and Jesper Hoffmeyer (2008) speak of 'semiosphere' as emergence of meaning and threshold for life. As topological forms give rise to relational structures, in my view, the description of these forms opens up the possibility for a pragmatic understanding of meaning as complex field of dynamic relations grounded on socio-linguistic contexts.

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