Peirce and Pragmatism
Early American Pragmatists

C. S. Peirce (1839-1914)

G. H. Mead (1863-1913)

William James (1842-1910)

John Dewey (1859-1952)
Bad reasoning as well as good reasoning is possible; and this fact is the foundation of the practical side of logic.
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A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.
These are two phases in the larger process of the **self**. The **I** is an immediate and unthinking response that is also the basis of individual personality. The **me** is the phase of self that sees itself from the perspective of community values and expectations.
Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is, not a preparation for life; education is life itself.

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Pragmatism

on Meaning and Truth
What is meaning?

The primary goal of pragmatism was to clarify the meaning of words and sentences.
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For example, what does the following sentence mean?

“That’s one vicious looking dog!”
What is meaning?

The primary goal of pragmatism was to clarify the meaning of words and sentences.

That’s one vicious looking dog!

Meaning = Idea?
What is meaning?

The primary goal of pragmatism was to clarify the meaning of words and sentences.

Meaning = Idea? Meaning = Object? That’s one vicious looking dog!
What is meaning?

The primary goal of pragmatism was to clarify the meaning of words and sentences.

Meaning = Idea?
Meaning = Object?
Meaning = Behavior?

That's one vicious looking dog!
What is meaning?

The primary goal of pragmatism was to clarify the meaning of words.


"Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conceptions to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our concept of the object."

C. S. Peirce (1839-1914)
Meaning and Truth

**Meaning**: The meaning of a word or statement is its consequences for our actions. For two words or statements to differ in meaning, they must have different implications for our actions.

**Truth**: A statement is true if …

… it is still believed at the end of all inquiry.

… when acted on, it gets us where we want to be.
Four Basic Themes of Pragmatism

- Antiskepticism
- Fallibilism
- Fact-value continuity
- Primacy of practice
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Doubt requires justification just as much as belief.

René Descartes and his Methodological Doubt
Four Basic Themes of Pragmatism

• Antiskepticism
• Fallibilism
• Fact-value continuity
• Primacy of practice

None of our beliefs are immune from correction.

You are not God. Therefore, you might be mistaken.
Four Basic Themes of Pragmatism

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There is no clear border between description and prescription.

“Yer out!” both describes (“you were tagged”) and prescribes (“you did not score, and must return to the bench”).
Four Basic Themes of Pragmatism

- Antiskepticism
- Fallibilism
- Fact-value continuity
- Primacy of practice

Meaning and truth are grounded ultimately in our practice.

Success and failure is just practice with or without the right theory.
“The Fixation of Belief” (1877)

“The sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion.”

Charles Sanders Peirce
(1839-1914)
Belief, Doubt, & Inquiry

- **Belief** is a habit of mind; **doubt** is its absence.
- **Belief** guides actions; **doubt** inhibits actions.
- **Belief** is pleasant; **doubt** is unpleasant.
- **Inquiry** (thought) is our attempt to regain belief in the face of doubt.
- The sole object of **inquiry** is the settlement of opinion.
Four Methods for Fixing a Belief

• **Tenacity**: believe what seems right and hang on tight.
• **Authority**: believe the authorities.
• **A Priori**: follow your deepest prejudices.
• **Scientific**: test your beliefs against reality.

Which of these methods is most successful?
The Ethics of Belief
“The Ethics of Belief” (1877)

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

William Kingston Clifford (1845-1879)
CBS News/NY Times Poll
Sept. 4-8, 2007 (± 3%)

“Do you think Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?”

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Clifford on Believing

• Justification vs Truth
  “… the question is not whether their belief was true or false, but whether they entertained it on wrong grounds.” [p. 255, c2]

• Beliefs have consequences:
  short-term…
  long-term…

• One’s belief is not a wholly private affair
  “No one man’s belief is in any case a private matter….” [p. 323, c.2]
  The “universal duty of questioning all that we believe.” [p. 324, c.1]
  The social fabric of shared beliefs is a public trust.
Clifford’s Argument

Doing this makes me (and all of society) more credulous (i.e., it undermines the social fabric of reliable belief).

Doing this is more likely to lead to harmful actions.

What's morally relevant are my actions, not my beliefs.

Holding a belief on insufficient evidence is morally wrong.

He believed the ship was safe on insufficient evidence.

The shipowner is guilty of wrongdoing (even if the ship doesn't sink).

The ship sank.

The shipowner is also responsible for the deaths.
Beliefs with consequences...

Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.

I’m absolutely sure that there are weapons of mass destruction there and the evidence will be forthcoming.

We know where they are. They’re in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad, and east, west, south, and north, somewhat.

Some have argued that the nuclear threat from Iraq is not imminent. I would not be so certain.

We don’t want the “smoking gun” to be a mushroom cloud.

I’m not convinced.

Joschka Fischer
German Foreign Minister