History of Philosophy
64 American Pragmatism
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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes provides an overview of **American Pragmatism**, tracing its evolution from **process philosophy** and the works of **Alfred North Whitehead**. The text highlights a historical shift from 18th-century **mechanistic models** to **organic models** that view reality as a series of interconnected events rather than static substances. Central to this transition is the work of **Charles Sanders Peirce**, who pioneered the **scientific method** as a tool to move past subjective doubt and fix beliefs through practical consequences. **William James** further developed these ideas by emphasizing **concrete psychological experience**, defining truth based on the "cash value" or **workability** of a belief in providing human satisfaction. Ultimately, the source explains how **John Dewey** and his predecessors sought to unify **fact and value**, arguing that philosophy must focus on active involvement in the world rather than detached theoretical abstraction.

Briefing Document:

Analysis of American Pragmatism and Process Philosophy

Executive Summary

The transition from 18th-century mechanistic metaphysics to 19th-century organic models marks a significant shift in philosophical history, moving from a focus on enduring "substance" to a focus on "process" and "events." This evolution is characterized by the rejection of external relationships—where minds are passive recipients of data—in favor of internal, organic relationships where the subject and object are part of a continuous stream of experience.

American Pragmatism, rooted in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and expanded by William James and John Dewey, represents a "methodological revolution" that

prioritizes the practical over the theoretical. This school of thought rejects Cartesian universal doubt and foundationalism, instead advocating for the scientific method as the primary means of "fixing belief." Central to Pragmatism is the belief that experience is reality, and truth is defined not by static correspondence to an external world, but by its "workability" or "cash value" within human experience.

I. The Shift from Classical Metaphysics to Process Philosophy

Modern philosophy has undergone a fundamental transformation in its understanding of the nature of reality, moving away from classical metaphysics toward process-oriented models.

From Substance to Process

- **Classical Model:** Defined by "substance" as an enduring identity that remains constant through time.

- **Process Model:** Reality is composed of "events" that come and go. While there are enduring strains in long-extended events (such as the history of the cosmos), there is no permanent, unchanging substance.

- **The Ingredients of Reality:** Events are the primary ingredients, characterized by a subject-object continuum rather than a separation of the two.

The Organic vs. Mechanistic Model

The 18th-century "mechanist model" has been largely superseded by the "organic model," driven by advancements in 19th-century developmental biology and relativity physics.

- **Mechanistic Model:** Relies on "external relations," such as the causal interaction in Descartes' mind-body dualism. It views the mind as a passive recipient of data, leading to a claim of complete objectivity.

- **Organic Model:** Views relations as "internal," meaning they are inherent to the nature of the terms related. This model seeks to unify "fact" and "value," which were previously separated in mechanistic thought.

Critique of Alfred North Whitehead's Qualitative Monism

While Whitehead's process philosophy is instrumental in this shift, it faces criticism for "qualitative monism."

- **Quantitative Pluralism:** Whitehead acknowledges a numerical plurality of events and processes.

- **Qualitative Monism:** He applies the same descriptions to all events, whether they involve God, a human person, or a sense perception.

- **Limitations:** This overgeneralization fails to account for qualitative distinctions between the human person and natural phenomena. It results in a "slim identity" for persons, defined only by a stream of memory, which complicates ethical accountability; if there is no continuous agent, holding a person accountable for past actions becomes problematic.

II. Fundamental Characteristics of American Pragmatism

Pragmatism shares several core tenets with process philosophy, specifically the organic model and the rejection of fact-value separation. Its unique identity is defined by three primary characteristics:

1. Primacy of the Practical (The Concrete)

Pragmatism asserts that practical experience outweighs theoretical abstraction.

- **Against Intellectualism:** Pragmatists reject "intellectualism" (theory for theory's sake) and "spectator empiricism" (the idea of the mind as a passive observer).

- **Experience as Reality:** The underlying thesis is that human experience is reality—a concept rooted in the Hegelian tradition of looking through the lens of self-consciousness.

- **Rejection of Certainty:** Pragmatists disparage the "quest for certainty," arguing that "practical certainty" or "confidence sufficient to act" is all that is required for human life.

2. Organic Relationships

Pragmatism rejects the "atomistic" view of experience (e.g., John Locke's simple ideas).

- **Interconnectedness:** Experience is seen as a "stream of consciousness" (James) or a "problem situation" (Dewey) where past, present, and future are interrelated.

- **Refusal of Dualisms:** Because relationships are internal and organic, Pragmatism refuses dualisms such as mind/body or fact/value.

3. Philosophical Naturalism

Pragmatism is characterized by both methodological and metaphysical naturalism.

- **Methodological Naturalism:** The universal application of the scientific method to all forms of inquiry.

- **Metaphysical Naturalism:** Particularly evident in Dewey, this view holds that only natural processes exist and that these are amenable to evolutionary explanation, eliminating "fixed forms."

III. Charles Sanders Peirce and the Fixation of Belief

Charles Sanders Peirce (who preferred the term "Pragmaticism" to distinguish his views from later relativism) laid the foundation for the movement by focusing on how to make ideas clear and how to "fix" beliefs through the scientific method.

The Rejection of Cartesianism

Peirce offered a systematic critique of the Cartesian tradition that dominated modern philosophy.

Cartesian Principle	Peirce's Pragmaticist Critique
Universal Doubt: Philosophy must begin by questioning everything.	**Practical Impossibility:** We cannot begin with complete doubt because we are often unaware of the beliefs we take for granted.

Individual Consciousness: The ultimate test of certainty is private/intuitive.

Public Confirmation: Conviction is not truth; clarity and distinctness are criteria for meaning, not necessarily for truth.

Single Thread of Inference: Following a single mathematical/rational chain.

Multiform Argumentation: Philosophy should imitate science by trusting a multitude and variety of arguments (experimental method).

Inexplicable Ultimates: Attributing unexplained facts to God's will.

Requirement for Explanation: To label a fact "inexplicable" is a failure to explain it; science requires conclusions that explain facts.

The Methodology of Truth

Peirce identified four ways to fix belief, advocating for only the fourth:

1. **Method of Tenacity:** Refusing to change one's mind despite the facts.

2. **Method of Authority:** Relying on a central power (problematic when authorities conflict).

3. **Method of Tradition/Intuition:** Relying on conventions (problematic because intuitions vary by tradition).

4. **Scientific Method:** A self-corrective process involving a community of observers and the experimental confirmation of hypotheses.

IV. William James: Psychology and "Cash Value"

William James expanded Pragmatism by shifting the focus from Peirce's scientific realism to a psychological and holistic view of experience.

Experience as a Psychological Stream

James viewed experience not as a collection of atomistic "sense data" but as a "stream of consciousness." To James, the experience of a "patch of color" is an abstraction; the "concrete experience" is the holistic, felt reality of that moment.

The Pragmatic Definition of Truth

For James, truth is not a static property but a dynamic process.

- **Workability:** Truth is defined as that which "works" or has "cash value" in the context of human experience.

- **Psychological Satisfaction:** James applied this to complex worldviews. For instance, he defined "Spiritualism" (Theism) as a belief that affirms an eternal moral order and "lets loose hope," whereas "Materialism" denies this order.

- **Testing Beliefs:** If a belief provides the "experience of hope" or a sense of "satisfaction," it possesses "cash value" and can be considered true in a pragmatic sense.

Method of Dispute Resolution

James utilized Pragmatism as a tool to settle philosophical disputes by anticipating the practical consequences of a belief. If no practical difference can be found between two opposing theories, the dispute is considered idle. Truth, therefore, is inextricably linked to the psychological and practical effects a belief has on the believer.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to American Pragmatism and Process Philosophy

This study guide is based on the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes regarding the transition from Whitehead's process philosophy to the development of American Pragmatism. It examines the shift from classical metaphysics to organic models of reality, the methodological revolutions of Charles Sanders Peirce, and the psychological pragmatism of William James.

Part 1: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. **How does process philosophy redefine the concept of "ultimate reality" compared to classical metaphysics?** In classical metaphysics, ultimate

reality is defined by substance and an enduring identity that persists through time. Process philosophy replaces this with the concept of "process," where the primary ingredients are "events" that come and go rather than static substances.

2. **What is the distinction between Whitehead's "quantitative pluralism" and his "qualitative monism"?** Whitehead is a quantitative pluralist because he believes there are numerically endless events and processes occurring in the cosmos. However, he is a qualitative monist because he applies the same fundamental description to all events, whether they involve a human sense perception or the nature of God.

3. **Why does Dr. Holmes suggest that Whitehead's ethic struggles with the concept of accountability?** Whitehead's system views the human person as a successive stream of events rather than one continuous, enduring agent. Because there is no single continuous agent, it becomes difficult to establish a basis for holding a person today accountable for actions taken in the past.

4. **How did the shift from a mechanistic model to an organic model change the view of "relations"?** The 18th-century mechanistic model relied on "external relations," such as the causal interaction between a separate mind and body. The organic model views relations as "internal," meaning they are inherent to the very nature of the terms involved in the relationship.

5. **What is the "primacy of the practical" in American Pragmatism?** This principle asserts that practical application and concrete experience take precedence over theoretical abstraction. It emphasizes the relationship between thinking and doing, viewing experience as an active involvement rather than a passive or purely cognitive exercise.

6. **How does John Dewey's "spectator empiricism" critique the tradition of John Locke?** Dewey uses the term "spectator empiricism" to criticize Locke's view of the mind as a passive recipient of data. Dewey argues that experience is not a passive observation but an active, organic process involving the whole person.

7. **What are the three methods of "fixing belief" that Charles Sanders Peirce rejects, and why?** Peirce rejects the method of tenacity (stubbornly refusing

to change one's mind), the method of authority (which fails when authorities conflict), and the method of tradition/intuition (which varies across cultures). He argues these methods cannot ensure objective truth because they lack a self-correcting, public mechanism.

8. **According to Peirce, why is it impossible to begin philosophy with "universal doubt" as Descartes suggested?** Peirce argues we cannot begin with complete doubt because we are often unaware of our own underlying beliefs and assumptions. In practical terms, it is impossible to discard all certainties simultaneously to reach a state of absolute doubt.

9. **How does William James define the "truth" of a belief?** For James, truth is defined by "workability" or its "cash value" in the context of human experience. A belief is considered true if it produces practical, satisfying consequences or provides a necessary psychological framework, such as hope.

10. **In what way is American Pragmatism influenced by the Hegelian tradition?** Pragmatism, particularly in Dewey's work, follows the Hegelian move from abstraction to concrete experience. Like Hegel, pragmatists often view experience as reality itself, though they frequently convert Hegel's absolute idealism into a naturalistic framework.

Part 2: Answer Key

1. **Redefining Reality:** Shift from enduring substance to a process of fleeting events.

2. **Pluralism vs. Monism:** Many events (pluralism) but all are of the same nature (monism).

3. **Accountability:** Lack of a continuous agent makes historical responsibility difficult to justify.

4. **Internal Relations:** Relations are part of the entities themselves, not external forces acting upon them.

5. **Primacy of the Practical:** Doing is more important than abstract theorizing; reality is found in action.

6. **Spectator Empiricism:** Critique of the passive "mind-as-mirror" view; advocates for active engagement.

7. **Rejected Methods:** Tenacity, Authority, and Tradition/Intuition; rejected for lacking objective, self-correcting evidence.

8. **Universal Doubt:** Impossible because we always hold unconscious "taken for granted" beliefs.

9. **Truth:** Redefined as "workability" or the practical "cash value" of a concept in experience.

10. **Hegelian Influence:** Focus on the "concrete" and viewing the dialectic of experience as the unfolding of reality.

Part 3: Essay Questions

1. **The Organic vs. Mechanistic Models:** Compare and contrast the 18th-century mechanistic model of science and philosophy with the 19th-century organic model. How did the shift toward "internal relations" and the "subject-object continuum" fundamentally alter the way philosophers like Whitehead and Dewey understood human knowledge?

2. **Peirce's Methodological Revolution:** Analyze Charles Sanders Peirce's critique of Cartesianism. How does his advocacy for the "scientific method" as a way to fix belief represent a departure from the foundationalism of modern philosophy, and what does it imply about the nature of "objective" truth?

3. **The Evolution of Experience:** Discuss the pragmatist rejection of "atomistic" experience (simple ideas/sense data). How do William James's "stream of consciousness" and John Dewey's "problem situations" provide a more holistic view of reality, and what are the implications for the separation of fact and value?

4. **Naturalism in American Thought:** Distinguish between "methodological naturalism" and "metaphysical naturalism" as presented in the lecture. How do these two forms of naturalism manifest in the works of James and Dewey,

particularly regarding their views on God, evolution, and the history of philosophy?

5. **Psychology and Truth:** Explore William James's assertion that truth is "workability." Using his examples of materialism versus spiritualism, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of defining truth based on "cash value" and the psychological experience of hope.

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Cash Value	William James's term for the practical, psychological, or situational utility of an idea; the "workability" that determines a belief's truth.
External Relations	A hallmark of the mechanistic model where entities (like mind and body) interact but remain essentially independent of one another.
Fallacy of Misplaced Concretion	A Whiteheadian concept (referenced by students) regarding the error of treating abstract mental constructs as if they were concrete realities.
Internal Relations	A hallmark of the organic model where the relationship is essential to the identity and nature of the things related.
Methodological Naturalism	The universal application of the scientific method and experimental inquiry to all fields of study.
Metaphysical Naturalism	The belief that only natural processes and entities exist, often excluding the supernatural and relying on evolutionary explanations.
Pragmaticism	The term Charles Sanders Peirce used for his philosophy to distinguish it from other forms of pragmatism that he felt abandoned the objectivity of truth.

Qualitative Monism	The view that all events and processes in the universe, from the divine to the mundane, are fundamentally the same in nature.
Quantitative Pluralism	The view that the universe consists of a numerically infinite or vast number of individual events and processes.
Spectator Empiricism	John Dewey's critical label for the traditional view (e.g., Locke) that the mind is a passive observer reflecting external data.
Subject-Object Continuum	The rejection of a sharp divide between the knower (subject) and the known (object), suggesting that both contribute to the knowing situation.
Subjective Aim	In process philosophy, the decision or goal-oriented selection made within an event among various possibilities.