

# Philosophy for Children and Pragmatism

## Part III: The Pragmatist Notions Embedded in the P4C Movement

Agora Philosophical Forum

Handout by Soroush Marouzi

### An Overview of the P4C-Pragmatism Relation:

- The P4C as a social movement was initiated in the early 1970's.
- Following his resignation from Columbia University in 1972, Matthew Lipman became a philosophy professor at Montclair College in New Jersey where he established the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC).
- Lipman believed that the American educational system does not provide a proper ground to foster children's 'habits of efficient thinking' to arrive at 'independent judgments' (Lipman 1976, p 18). Hence, he established IAPC.
  - o Note that 'habits of efficient thinking' is clearly a Peircean term.
- Over the past decades, Lipman and his colleagues have provided some educational materials for children not covered in the usual curriculums at schools, aiming to foster their mental habits.
  - o You can overview the titles of some of their educational materials in the IAPC website:  
<https://www.montclair.edu/cehs/academics/centers-and-institutes/iapc/>
- The P4C movement is to be understood in two branches: practical and theoretical.
  - o The P4C *practitioners* attempt to organize classrooms for children and training workshops for teachers so the P4C materials reach out its targeted audience.
  - o The P4C *theorists*, on the other hand, attempt to defend the educational method advocated and practiced by the P4C movement. For doing so, they appeal to various theoretical disciplines including developmental psychology, philosophy of education, and pragmatist philosophies.
- In this workshop, we overviewed the main aspects of the classical American pragmatist philosophies. Now we shall turn to the P4C movement to see how pragmatism, as a philosophical position, manifests itself in the theoretical literature of the P4C movement. In other words, we would like to see how the P4C theorists appeal to American pragmatism to justify their educational method.
- We have learned that the classical American pragmatism is to be understood in two different versions: Jamesian and Peircean. We have briefly discussed that each of these two versions of pragmatism puts forward different epistemological and metaphysical notions.
  - o Characterizing the history of the classical American pragmatism as such, we shall try to understand later pragmatists based on their commitments to either Peircean or Jamesian pragmatic elements. For instance:
    - Frank P. Ramsey followed up Peirce's philosophical program and improved upon it. Ramsey improved Peirce's notion of mathematics and developed a mathematical formalism to account for Peirce's dispositional account of belief. The latter, in turn, led Ramsey to lay out the foundation of modern decision theory and game theory in the 1920's.
    - There is a Peircean pragmatic theme lurking in Hilary Putnam's writings, as well. Putnam's 'pragmatic realism' is a sophisticated metaphysical notion that extends Peirce's convergence theory of truth. Adding a political dimension to Peirce's

pragmatism, Putnam improved Peirce's notion of truth and provided an epistemic justification for democracy. In addition, Putnam put forward a new interpretation of Peirce's interconnected notions of probability, community, and love.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein endorsed some Peircean conceptions in his later philosophy. His implicit interest in Peirce's pragmatism was due to Frank Ramsey's critiques of Wittgenstein's earlier program in *Tractatus*. In particular, Wittgenstein's theory of meaning incorporated Peirce's pragmatic maxim, claiming that meaning of a term is to be understood in light of how one uses it in various social contexts. Nonetheless, he remained faithful to some aspects of Jamesian brand of pragmatism, including what Russell used to call James' mysticism.
  - Richard Rorty followed up Jamesian version of pragmatism. Turning his back to Peirce's objective account of truth, Rorty's pluralist account of inquiry flirts with a relativist notion of truth. In this way, the neo-pragmatist philosophy of Rorty sympathized with some post-modern philosophies. Rorty's philosophical program, as such, changed the direction of pragmatism toward its Jamesian version such that philosophers gradually forgot how the inventor of this program would have disliked Rorty's philosophy.
  - John Dewey attempted to stand in the middle ground. He rejected some of the long-lasting epistemological notions such as subjective-objective dichotomy - which would go on to be later picked up by Noam Chomsky. Although his writings on logic did not turn out to be influential as those of Peirce's, his most significant contribution to pragmatism might be his notion of education-pragmatism relation. He was also an active figure in the progressivist movement in education.
  - Some contemporary leading pragmatist philosophers such as Huw Price (Bertrand Russell Professor of Cambridge University) and Cheryl Misak (University Professor of the University of Toronto and a member of Canadian Royal Society) are attempting to reorient pragmatism on its Peircean notions. They argue James deviated pragmatism from its right path – the task to be completed by Rorty who made a bridge between pragmatism and postmodern philosophies. While Price attempts to defend Peircean brand of pragmatism in his sophisticated philosophical writings, Misak is more focused on doing historical works on pragmatism to motivate contemporary pragmatists to improve upon the 'best' pragmatists of all time: C. S. Peirce and Frank P. Ramsey.
    - For the most recent hot topics among the pragmatists, check out the following book:

Misak, Cheryl, and Huw Price. "The Practical Turn: Pragmatism in Britain in the Long Twentieth Century." (2017).

      - In short, the hot topics in the book include the controversy on how to understand Ramsey's pragmatism and Ramsey's influence on Wittgenstein in 1929. I have already used some of the arguments made in this book in this workshop. See the content of the book here:  
<http://britishacademy.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.5871/bacard/9780197266168.001.0001/upso-9780197266168>
- So far, we have made two important claims: 1) The P4C theorists appeal to pragmatism to justify their educational method; and, 2) Pragmatism is to be understood in two different versions: Peircean and Jamesian. We shall now turn to an important question: **what kind of pragmatism is being employed in the P4C literature?** You should be able to answer to this question by the end of this workshop.

- Here is the short answer: the Peircean version. This is the very reason that I find P4C an interesting social movement. Indeed, P4C is built upon a strong philosophical ground.

## Some Remarks on P4C:

- P4C is not to be understood as teaching raw philosophical materials to children, but as promoting their philosophical inquiry in general. The questions discussed by children might be ethical, political, logical, metaphysical, aesthetical, etc.
  - Hence, Lipman (1981) puts forward the agenda of the P4C as follows: Improving children's reasoning abilities and judgements by having them *thinking about thinking* as they discuss concepts of importance to them.
- The P4C movement *presupposes* that children are capable of critical and higher order reasoning (i.e. thinking about thinking) which constitutes a philosophical inquiry.
  - By the time Lipman initiated this movement in 1970's, this presupposition was a controversial one, for Piaget's developmental psychology which was the dominant notion in psychology departments of the time was suggesting that children are not capable of philosophical reasoning. During 1970's and 1980's, Piaget's developmental psychology was accepted by the scholars in education departments. As such, Lipman's social-philosophical program was to be seen as an unjustified one by psychologists and educational theorists.
  - Nonetheless, this presupposition turned out to be an acceptable one. In 1980's, Gareth Matthews succeeded to reject Piaget's account of children's cognitive abilities on the empirical grounds. Thus, the P4C movement had found new motivation to go on. Lipman was right.
    - To read more on this topic see the chapter five of the following book:  
Gregory, Maughn Rollins, Joanna Haynes, and Karin Murriss, eds. *The Routledge international handbook of philosophy for children*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.
- As (Haynes 2002) explains, this is what happens in a P4C classroom:
  - "P4C involves pupils and their teacher sharing a short story, picture, poem, object, or some other stimulus. The children then take time to think of their own questions. These are then discussed briefly before one is selected for more extensive discussion".
  - The steps to follow in a class:  
"1) Getting started—begin with a relaxation exercise, agree rules of interaction; 2) Sharing a stimulus to prompt enquiry; 3) Pause for thought; 4) Questioning—the pupils think of interesting or puzzling questions; 5) Connections—making links between the questions; 6) Choosing a question to begin an enquiry; 7) Building on each other's ideas—during which the teacher has to strike a balance between encouraging the children to follow on from each other's ideas and allowing related lines of enquiry to open up; 8) Recording the discussion—e.g. by graphic mapping; and, 9) Review and closure—summarizing, reflecting on the process itself, whether minds were changed, etc".
- Over the decades, there have been some empirical findings reported by P4C theorists showing the significant positive outcomes of doing P4C in practice. A meta-analysis of these studies can be found in Trickey and Topping (2004). Here are some examples mentioned in this article:
  - Significant positive impacts on students' logical reasoning skills and reading scores (Lipman and Bierman, 1970).
  - Significant improvements in reading, critical thinking, and inter-personal relationships. However, no statistical evidence on having positive impacts on curiosity and logical thinking was found (Haas 1980).

- Significant positive impacts on reading skills, mathematics, formal reasoning, and creative thinking (The Education Testing Service of Princeton report in 1980).
- Significant positive impacts on reading skills, examination of assumptions and alternative ideas, and reasoning behavior (William's 1993 study in Derbyshire England).
- Significant higher understanding of experimental subjects (Sasseville 1994).
- Improvements in language skills and self-confidence (Dyfed County Council 1994).
- For a recent reliable study on the empirical evaluation of the P4C outcomes see the following report: Gorard, Stephen, Nadia Siddiqui, and Beng Huat See. "Philosophy for Children: Evaluation Report and Executive Summary." *Education Endowment Foundation* (2015).
  - This report demonstrates significant improvements on students' confidence and their reading and mathematical skills after taking P4C courses.

## Some Underlying Pragmatist Aspects of P4C:

- **Community of Inquiry (COI):**
  - "The notion 'community of inquiry' has its origins in the work of C. S. Peirce. Later, community of inquiry was extensively developed by Matthew Lipman" (Pardales and Girod 2006, p 299).
    - The class environment is to resemble a COI. It is in such an environment that students seek out meaningful situations and truth. Indeed, Lipman extended Peirce's account of COI. While Peirce employed this concept to account for the interaction between *scientists*, Lipman employed it to characterize the interaction between *students* in a normative way.
  - COI is central to P4C's pedagogical approach. P4C theorists argue that COI "leads toward truth" (Gardner 1995, p 35).
    - It is clear that here Gardner has Peirce's convergence theory of truth in mind.
  - "The teacher is viewed as the more experienced when it comes to the procedures and techniques of inquiry, and background knowledge. But this authority is not supposed to extend to the favoring of particular points of view" (Pardales and Girod 2006, p 304).
    - This quotation implies that COI embraces a pluralist approach in leading class discussions. In addition, it suggests that P4C practitioners consciously resist against taking the route of the method of authority in fixation of belief as suggested by Peirce.
- **Fallibilist but Critical Epistemology:**
  - "Even as we want children to value themselves and to cherish their own thoughts and ideas, we also want them to appreciate that what they believe to be right and true may turn out to be neither" (Sharp 1995, p. 69; see also Lipman & Sharp, 1978, p. 349).
    - Remember that Peirce coined the term fallibilism which implies the suggestion mentioned in the quotation above. This was the very reason that Peirce was set against absolutist philosophies that were seeking for certain claims in their systematic theories.
- **Taking Social Norms into Account in a Conscious Way:**
  - Students should be exposed to the social norms in which they grow up. They should be familiar with social norms of their environment without being pushed to either accept or reject them.
    - Peirce was of the view that our habitual thoughts are significant driving forces of our inquiries and actions. The mental habits, in turn, are shaped by the social norms in which an individual grows. Thus, learning social norms would help an

individual to have a better grasp of her mental habits so she can either stick with them or attempt to find new ones. Thus, Peirce's notion of mental habits and social norms justifies teaching social norms to students.

- **The Ethical Norms in the Class:**

- Reasonableness, attentive listening and empathy, taking others' opinions seriously, and attempting to reach an agreement are among the ethical virtues encouraged in P4C classrooms.
  - Such ethical norms are justified on the grounds that they facilitate communal inquiry in the class. Thus, Peirce's account of inquiry justifies these ethical norms.
  - Nevertheless, we should be careful here! Peirce's account of community of inquiry presupposes the existence of social and ethical norms, however, Lipman's COI is looking for *creating and discovering* these norms. Read more on this topic in the last section of Pardales and Girod (2006).
- The ethical aspects of COI suggest that we should take children's comments seriously. They are in class to play a part in our communal inquiry.
  - To have a better grasp of this aspect, I would like to suggest you to check out the following talk by Thomas Jackson. See how this guy treats children's comments: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AZGLukn0JM&t=644s>
- Such ethical norms of the COI environment are the very reason that make P4C theorists interested in feminist epistemologists. For instance, Sharp (1993) argues that philosophy would benefit from taking children's philosophical views into account. She believes children's views, like women's, have been suppressed and overlooked over the history of philosophy. Similarly, Bleazby (2011) finds some conceptual commonalities between P4C and feminist epistemology.

- **The Social Self:**

- For Peirce, the self is social by its very nature. As he puts it, "to be a self is to be a possible member of some community". The self grows as it enhances its self-control skill.
  - The self-control skill amounts to controlling our feelings, thoughts, and habits. It is in this way that having a *clear idea* about our *mental habits* is justified. See more on this topic in Sharp (1993, p 53).
- For Peirce, thinking is an internal dialogue between the critical self (in which the mental habits operate) and the innovative self (which challenges the habits of mind). In this way, thinking invites *the social*, for the social is linked with the habits of mind or the critical self.
- George Herbert Mead improved upon Peirce's concept of social self.
  - Mead never published a book in his life. He was the founder of the school of symbolic interaction in sociology. He is known as the originator of the idea that self is a social construction.
  - He also incorporated Peirce's semiotics in his account of social self and improved upon it: In a 'sign situation', the acts of one agent affect another. For him, one is engaged in a 'symbolic interaction', if she produces some behavioral gestures in a way that she is aware of what the kind of responses that her interlocutor will be disposed to by her initial gestures.
  - Mead argued that 'the self' comes into being within the process of symbolic interaction. For him, 'thinking' is the internalized social interaction. He believed that our understanding of meaning is enhanced by role playing.

- We internalize social patterns of behavior and learn to anticipate the responses of others. This is how the ‘unity of self’ comes into being.
  - Mead took the pragmatist theory of signs into the world of neurobiology: a disposition to respond to a sign is present in the central nervous system a potential response. There is a corresponding pattern to be potentially activated in response to stimuli.
  - Matthew Lipman was highly influenced by Mead’s Peircean account of social self.
- **Hypothesis-Formation in Classrooms:**
  - Students are encouraged to make hypotheses about the topic of discussion. Then, they try to evaluate them in a co-operative process, seeking for ‘better ideas’.
    - This aspect of the P4C pedagogy is pretty much in line with Peirce’s account of abductive reasoning.
- **Note that these pragmatist aspects are all Peircean. Thus, one may claim that P4C is a social-theoretical movement that draws on the Peircean version of pragmatism. To clarify this claim, we can examine Bleazby’s (2011) interesting paper.**

## **P4C Against Absolutism and Relativism:**

- **Bleazby’s (2011) Thesis:**
  - Bleazby (2011) claims that P4C’s notion of truth is not compatible with absolutism and relativism.
    - If the first part of this claim is acceptable, then it follows that P4C is on board with pragmatist philosophies in their critique of absolutism.
    - If the second part of this claim is acceptable, then it follows that P4C is not compatible with Jamesian version of pragmatism that calls for the plasticity of truth.
- **Absolutism in Philosophy:**
  - As Bleazby (2011) puts it, absolutism amounts to the following claims:
    - 1. There is some fixed and objective reality.
    - 2. Truths are statements or beliefs that correspond to this reality.
    - 3. We have some purely objective method of knowing which helps us to know the reality as it really is.
    - 4. Truth and reason provide us absolute certainty.
      - I believe that Peirce only accepts the first claim.
      - Question: How would Peirce argue against the second, third, and fourth claims?
- **Absolutism in Education:**
  - Absolutism amounts to the teacher-centered, knowledge transmission model of education (Bleazby 2011).
  - In Dewey’s words, it suggests that “Truth exists ready-made somewhere. Study is then the process by which an individual draws on what is in storage”.
  - It is also called the ‘banking teaching’ approach (see Bleazby 2011, p 454).
  - The problematic aspect of absolutism in education: Such learning doesn’t enable students to autonomously transform reality or construct their own meanings (Freire, 1993, p. 54).
- **Absolutism and P4C:**
  - Bleazby (2011) argues that the way P4C is practiced is not compatible with what philosophical notion of absolutism implies for educational method.

- Another way to show that P4C is not compatible with absolutism is to explore the underlying epistemology of P4C. Here is a simple argument implicit in Bleazby (2011):
  - Absolutism is not compatible with a fallibilist epistemology.
  - The way P4C is being practiced shows that it commits to fallibilism.
  - Thus, absolutism is not compatible with P4C.
- Absolutism pushes students to “seek out conclusions that appear to be perfect, universal and settled. This can discourage students from recognizing problems with their own ideas and with those of others” (Bleazby 2011, p 455).
- On the contrary, the implicit fallibilist epistemology of P4C suggest that there are no perfect, universal, and settled conclusions.
- “Absolutism is also associated with authoritarianism”.
  - Thus, it amounts to the Peirce’s account of the method of authority in fixation of beliefs. The method of authority is not the route that P4C takes.
- Absolutism does not provide any justified ground for ‘collaborative thinking’.
  - Nevertheless, the very Peircean concept of COI presupposes the advantage of collaborative thinking.
- **Relativism in Philosophy:**
  - Relativism denies that there is a knowable and static reality (Bleazby 2011).
  - Relativism suggests that truth is constructed and relative to particular individuals (Bleazby 2011).
    - It should remind you of James’ account of plasticity of truth.
    - James attempted to incorporate his relativist notion of truth in his pragmatic maxim.
  - As Bleazby (2011) puts it, subjectivism is the narrowest form of relativism.
    - Subjectivism suggests that one can never transcend her own situatedness.
    - It claims that *even if* there is some fixed-objective reality, we are never able to recognize it as it really is. Consequently, truth claims are constructed by individuals.
    - Thus, it is a claim regarding the process of inquiry and human perceptions, with no direct or explicit metaphysical significance.
    - Subjectivism implies that “all opinions and beliefs are equally true” (Bleazby 2011, p 455).
    - From subjectivism it follows that we cannot evaluate or criticize others’ opinions and beliefs.
- **Relativism in Education:**
  - “Subjectivism is associated with student-centered and constructivist pedagogies” (Bleazby 2011, p 455).
    - It suggests that teacher’s beliefs are no more truthful than those of others.
  - Subjectivism enables students to construct their own truths.
  - Relativism and subjectivism suggest that there is no need for self-correction. Thus, they reject fallibilism as an epistemological notion.
  - If truth is relative to the cultures of the inquirers, then it follows that social communications are only possible among people coming from a similar background.
- **Relativism and P4C:**
  - Bleazby (2011) argues that relativism is not compatible with the underlying epistemological notion of P4C. Here is her implicit argument:
    - Relativism is not compatible with a fallibilist epistemology.

- Why? Because relativism rejects the need for self-correction, which is the very implication of fallibilism
  - The way P4C is being practiced shows that it commits to fallibilism.
    - Why? Because students are encouraged to build upon their previous claims so they come up with more and more accurate beliefs and sound arguments.
  - Thus, relativism is not compatible with P4C.
- It is true that P4C suggests a student-centered pedagogy, but it does not take the path of subjectivism.
- Some P4C scholars (e.g. Gregory 2002) argue that children should learn the social norms associated with their beliefs. Of course; it does not mean that social norms are to be thought as absolute truths. According to the proponents of relativism, however, such approach is a kind of cultural imperialism.
- Relativism does not provide any justified reasons for willingness to hear and collaborative thinking (i.e. a community-based account of inquiry). Nevertheless, P4C theorists find these two aspects of social coordination as important virtues.
- Cultural relativism sets against having cultural diversity in a community of inquirers on the grounds that such community impedes social communications. P4C, on the other hand, encourages diversity of inquirers.
  - Question: On what grounds Peirce and Dewey defend a non-homogenous, community-based account of inquiry? Hint: see Bleazby (2011, pp 460-461).

### **Some Remarks on Dewey's Pragmatism:**

- Bleazby (2011, p 458) rightly points out that according to James' pragmatist account of truth, the true is what brings personal satisfaction for an individual. He argues that Dewey's conception of truth is not compatible with that of James.
- Dewey rejects the subject-object dichotomy.
- Dewey's notion of experience is formulated in an implicit biological framework. He discusses the organism-environment relation which, for him, is dialectical by its very nature.
  - Question: Is this claim compatible with Darwinian evolutionary biology?
    - Answer: No. Darwin's account of 'adaptation' suggests a one-way causal relation between an organism and its environment.
    - Note that later Modern synthesis biologists of the twentieth-century endorsed the dialectical relation between organism and environment. Richard Lewontin is among the pioneers of this view.
  - Question: How reading Dewey's pragmatism in mirror of Darwinian biology can help us to understand his deviation from Peirce's concepts of experience and truth?

### **Some Questions/Thoughts:**

- Peirce's Pragmatism was born in 1870'. Matthew Lipman draw on Peirce's pragmatism in the early 1970's. Why it took about a hundred years for Peirce's pragmatism to inspire an important social movement like P4C?
- We argued that P4C draws on Peircean brand of pragmatism. Assuming you believe that James' pragmatism is the best pragmatic position in hand, how would you modify the educational method of P4C in practice in light of Jamesian brand of pragmatism?

- Assuming you believe Putnam's internal realism or pragmatic realism is the best pragmatic metaphysical notion, how would you employ this notion in a P4C classroom?
- Let's play with the pragmatic account of inquiry more! In Peirce's pragmatism, the concepts of inquiry, experience, truth, and belief are heavily interconnected. Think about Asghar Farhadi's movies. You may think about *A Separation* (2011) or *The Past* (2013), for instance. What is the implicit notion of inquiry in Farhadi's movies? Do you see any similarity between Farhadi's account of inquiry and Peirce's account of inquiry? Try to incorporate the concepts of the convergence theory of truth, fallibilism, the social self, and human experience in your argument.
- Here is James' view of inquiry and growth of knowledge: "You may alter your house *ad libitum*, but the ground plan of the first architect persists – you can make great changes, but you cannot change a Gothic church into a Doric temple" (1907, p 83). Now, again, think about Farhadi's *The Past* (2013). How does the past manifest itself in present time in Farhadi's view? Why do the characters of the movie are attempting to change the decoration or the colors of their place? Why that small kid hits the bucket of paint when he is frustrated and angry? Do you see any conceptual similarities between Farhadi's account of the past and knowledge with that of James'? Does that make it incompatible with Peirce's view?
- In what sense Iranians are used to use the word 'pragmatic' in their everyday life? In other words, what is Iranian public culture's understanding of the term 'pragmatic'? Is it more Peircean or more Jamesian?
- Let's say you are debating about the existence of god with a friend. You are an atheist and he is a believer in god. After a while, you both get tired of discussion on this topic. At the end, your friend says: "okay, you have your own opinion and taste, and I have my own ones. Everyone thinks differently about these fundamental questions of our life", and the discussion ends. How we should understand this social situation and discussion? Are the speakers committed to a kind of ethical take or a metaphysical notion? Indeed, what is the difference between these two? Why it should even matter? If you see a special ethical theme or a metaphysical one lurking in the back of this discussion, on what pragmatic grounds we can justify it? Peircean or Jamesian?
- Think about Dora Russell's experimental school program and Ludwig Wittgenstein pedagogical approach to philosophy. Let's assume they were both aware of Peirce's pragmatism and his account of fixation of belief (e.g. method of authority and method of tenacity). True, this assumption is to be justified by a conclusive historical work; but, I believe it is very plausible, for we know that Ramsey met Wittgenstein in 1923 and Russells was also in contact with Ramsey before running their experimental school. Do you see any similarities between Peirce's account of fixation of belief and fallibilism with educational method of Russells and Wittgenstein?

**“Philosophers often behave like little children who scribble some marks on a piece of paper at random and then ask the grown-up “What’s that?” – It happened like this: the grown-up had drawn pictures for the child several times and said: “this is a man”, “this is a house”, etc. And then the child makes some marks too and asks: what’s this then?” – Ludwig Wittgenstein**