

## PRAGMATISM

Prof. Dr. Seçkin ERGİN\*

**Author's Note :**In the academic year of 2004-2005,types of “Essay Writing” has been included to Yasar University, School of Foreign Languages, English Prep School curriculum as to foster the student's ability to express his/herself in a meaningful way. Thus, the students, being equipped with the knowledge of basic rules of rhetoric in the process of perfecting his/her acquisition of the targeted language, would gain a better access to English language.

This article has been prepared to set an example for “Descriptive” essay writing which has always been the most popular and widely practiced one among the other essay types such as “Argumentative,” ”Narrative,” since it permits the extension of its scope from merely describing the personal impressions of a place, a person, or an object to the depiction of an information less known by the majority of people, but esteemed by the writer to be crucial in enlightening the reader about it. This exemplary essay on “Pragmatism” which aims to introduce a philosophical, but at the same time a practical thinking, is one of these “Descriptive” essays developed to illustrate the basic tenants and strategies with a guide line given below:

**Arrangement:** The essay consists of an1-Introduction, 2-Main Body (five paragraphs), and 3-a Conclusion.

**Transitions:** They are marked with bold letters.

**Topic Sentences:** They are invariably located, ranging from the beginning of the paragraph to the end of it, as exemplified in the following:

**Introduction:** Pragmatism concerns itself with reaching the truth

**First Paragraph:** Pragmatism is not related to the old systems of thought

**Second paragraph:** Pragmatism supplies for further investigation to reach the truth.

**Third paragraph:** Discussions must be centered around the methodology of Pragmatism.

**Fourth paragraph:** Pragmatism offers a method to be used in every walks of life from human relations to jurisdiction.

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\* Director of School of Foreign Languages Yaşar University

**Fifth paragraph:** As for its objectives, Pragmatism offers practical solutions to problems of every sort.

**Conclusion:** Pragmatism is, then, a scientific thinking applicable to concrete and abstract problems.

#### **How to Read the Essay? Further Explanations and Clues:**

*The following article exemplifies how we can use separate but coherent paragraphs to explain and pin down a crucial term which has so far confusing or changing meanings and consequent connotations. In this type of writing, which may rightly be called “descriptive” a key term helps us to focus on the territory it covers and elevate our discussions from the level of abstraction. To avoid stereo-typed dictionary definitions of the key word, Pragmatism, rhetorical questions in regard to its common properties have been referred to as to set up a tone of interest in the introductory paragraph.*

*The first paragraph finds an answer as to whether pragmatism as a philosophy of life has been affiliated or not with other systematic thoughts; and in doing this, discussions are linked to the following one.*

*The proceeding paragraph which serves as an afterthought of the previous one illustrates another means of defining the word: that is setting up comparisons to refute possible analogies with other materialistic approaches to life and consequently to clarify its unique status.*

*Since its alliance to any other philosophical thinking, especially to the dogmatic ones, has not been justified, and since it has been defined as an ever developing idea of truth, or of practical workable truths, the emerging rhetorical questions will be such: What is new about it?” “What is it good for?”*

*Having earlier decided that Pragmatism employs an empirical way of investigation, a methodology of attaining truth—useful facts through experimentation, the third paragraph functions as to prove its application to everyday usage.*

*Related examples of its usage from the every walk of life from state affairs to jurisdiction and to education provides the basic discussions of the fourth paragraph.*

*Since every philosophical thinking whether idealistic or materialistic aims at deciphering the meaning of life, as Aristotle once said, what will be the objectives of Pragmatism on the way to meaningful life that the modern man longs for. The answer lies in its “problem-solving“ quality which the modern man finds adopted to his peculiar situation.*

*The concluding paragraph states once more that pragmatism rests upon scientific methods of investigating and systematizing facts about life, rather than dealing with abstractions.*

## PRAGMATISM

In defining Pragmatism,<sup>1</sup> which represents the most typical American way of thinking in its emphasis on experience, rhetorical questions of the following sort are required: Is Pragmatism a hybrid philosophy named after the Greek Word "Pragma", or is it an application of old philosophical trends, as its founder the American philosopher William James stated: "[Pragmatism] agrees with nominalism in appealing to particulars, with utilitarianism in emphasizing practicality, with positivism in its disdain for metaphysical abstraction."<sup>2</sup> Is it purely a scientific logic applied to every aspect of life to reach a theory of truth, or is it the combination of the last two, since it (Pragmatism) mostly concerns itself with a scientific method of reaching truth, an idea of truth, which is its ultimate objective.

Plausible answers to these questions lie **firstly** in a systematic analysis of the properties of Pragmatism in regard with its etymological background, **that is**, whether or not it stemmed from older metaphysical disputes, abstractions, 'a priori' reasoning, fixed principles, closed systems, and absolute truths. The result of this survey of old philosophical trends will be that Pragmatism has nothing to do with these systems of thought, but they are sometimes instrumental to show what Pragmatism is not.

**Therefore**, tracing the etymology of this modern theory of truth -- a concept of truth based on an arbitration of human observation and experimentation rather than the eternal

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<sup>1</sup> Pragmatism is a philosophical thinking peculiar to American mind and culture. It is an empirical philosophy based on experimentation. According to Pragmatism, no idea or concept can be considered as an absolute truth unless it is validated through the years of observation and experimentation and is communally accepted. It is basically influenced by the Darwinian idea of "accident" that is the unknown causation that changes the course of lines of species and events, but proven to be true. Pragmatism owes much to American philosopher C.S. Pierce, who formulated its principles and Renouvier, the French philosopher who coined the word 'experience' as the only yard stick to test validity of an idea. It was William James who stated that "Truth is not inherent in ideas but is something that happens to ideas in the process of being used in real life situations." (*Backgrounds of a American Literary Thought*, ed. by Rod W. Horton, and Herbert W. Edwards, Prentice Hall, Inc. (New York 1967), p.167

<sup>2</sup> "Nominalism" to minimize without reducing the value and meaning of an item or a discourse. "To utilize" is to make the best of a situation of a thing or the result of an experiment; "Positivism" a philosophical attitude related to the concrete scientific methods and results.

3-James, William. "What Pragmatism Means," *Rheotic for Exposition*, ed. Roger Chittick and Robert Stevick (New York, 1961) p.10.

laws of God, religious dogmas, and doctrines-- will be a waste of time, if the subject-matter we are dealing with is "pragmatically" approached. Knowing that Pragmatism supplies programs for further investigation of possible consequences of chain of events and occurrences, and laws of approximations leading to new facts(practical, workable truths), James himself would have answered the questions above with another meaningful question, again representing the workings of American mind: "What is it good for?"<sup>3</sup>

**Thus**, in defining Pragmatism, the discussions must be centered firstly around its methodology and then its objectives. As a method, it is usually applied to test the validity of possible truths and their usefulness and their adaptability to the situations and problems of every kind. Pragmatic method is an empiric one, which eliminates fixed principles and categories; it sets a system depending on an ever-changing experience which gains new dimensions in accordance with a changing concept of truth it creates.

Pragmatism offers a method to be used in every walks of life, in human relations, state affairs, jurisdiction, history, theological issues and especially in education. **For example**, state affairs and laws can be revised according to the changing situations which demand new solutions; educational programs based on "learn by doing" as pragmatic thinking demanded, can be re-arranged to answer the needs of gifted and less gifted children; its "cause and effect" formula guides the historians to find accurate explanations for the historical developments; for the individuals of post-industrial or rather, postmodern societies it suggests ways to interpret metaphysical questions as personal entities to cope with their existential anxieties..

**As for** its objectives, Pragmatism provides practical, possible solutions not only to concrete but also abstract problems with the help of scientific and philosophical thinking. Its objectives, being inherent in the use of truths that provide for people satisfactory relations with other aspects of their experiences rather than answering enigmas through speculations, have been thus justified for the modern man. Then, in the definition of Pragmatism and the reliability of its method and its concept of truth (abstract or concrete) which, in James's words, "poses no difference in conduct consequent upon a fact," co-exist<sup>4</sup> **In other words**,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,p.11

unlike other philosophical approaches to life, truth, personal or public, is attained not through speculative thinking , but through experience, whose reliability is open to testing and re-testing.

**In short**, Pragmatism with its positivist, empirical, utilitarian approach to life on both concrete and abstract levels, with its scientific logic applied as a method of reaching a theory of truth, set up to systematize an ever-changing stream of experience, has brought down the traditional philosophical thinking from its ivory tower It represents a very important aspect of American thought and character, with its emphasis on experience gained by challenging circumstances to attain possible results of an action--which is compounded by past experience and an idea of truth valuable as long as it rests upon absolute certainty and evidence.

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