

Last week's article presented pragmatism and some of its expressions in everyday life. This article will take up some of its close relatives, namely Bentham's utilitarianism and something called consequentialism. It might be helpful to first review or reiterate a few points about pragmatism.

First, it is helpful to begin to see a pattern with the isms. Like all the others, pragmatism was initially proposed by one guy – Charles Peirce. It was not some worldwide movement, a lot of people coming together to think deeply on and discuss truth and reality. Pragmatism is a rule of life today, and it came from one person who was a materialist. “Everybody says so,” “everybody knows it's true” has a real power over what people believe. Could “everybody” be wrong? Pragmatism is not divine knowledge, it started with one guy. “Everybody” has not concluded that pragmatism is true; “everybody” has been indoctrinated in subtle ways with the false belief of one man. It's not unlike the cults that have cropped up over the last 50 years or so.

Let's also reiterate that pragmatism, like scientism and like most all of the isms, is intrinsically materialistic (the only existence is material existence). Materialism (and thus atheism) had become the “in thing.” To be one of the cool kids – in academia (at the university level), in education, in the media, pretty much everywhere – you had to be a materialist. Materialism gained the upper hand in popular thought.

If it was just one guy proposing pragmatism, how did it become so widespread? Is it even possible for something false to become so widely accepted? Wouldn't somebody, maybe the government, sniff it out and correct it? A comparison we used in our Jr-Sr CCD class to address this question was the beanie babies. The kids seemed to enjoy looking up beanie babies on their little magic boxes (i.e., phones)! Now think about how the beanie baby craze came about – and most of all, that it *did* come about. One person, or maybe a small team of people, cooked up beanie babies. My guess is that they probably cost a whole dollar or two to produce but somehow people were paying thousands of dollars for them. The CCD high school class found some that are still being advertised for \$28,000 and \$50,000. Why? How? Through an aggressive marketing campaign; i.e., by a small group of people telling everyone else what they should value. The same was/is true for the isms. A new ism is proposed by one person, it's materialistic so fits in with the times, and then it's aggressively marketed – through educational systems, politics, business, and so on; today, of course, through social media as well. It's simply in the air. We just took up scientism in the CCD class. We asked if anyone had ever heard of scientism or had its meaning explained. No – uniformly, no. The next question to the CCD students was: have you heard that there is conflict between religion and science, that you have to choose one or the other, both can't be true. Once again, the answer was uniform – Yes. So people are being trained to accept the isms without ever bringing them out. Is it any wonder that people are falling away from the faith, from truth, even from sanity, more and more? Begin to recognize expression of these isms in everyday life and challenge them.

Given an understanding of pragmatism, it probably won't take much to explain consequentialism and utilitarianism. To a large extent, they can be seen as just an extension of pragmatism or even part & parcel of it. Let us begin, then, with a little review of pragmatism. One good example of an expression of pragmatism is that “the lived experience” is the supreme decider of what is right and good and true. This has penetrated even the human dimension of the Church. There are those who call themselves Catholic who ascribe to this, promote it, insist that this is the way to decide on what is right and good and true. Is living together outside of marriage ok? Well, we have to look to at the “lived experience.” What do people say? Do people like it? Does it make them feel good? Of course, *of course*, we cannot consider what God has said; that would be absurd since there is no God. This does not mean that the Church does not want to talk to people about what's going on with them – that's not what opposition to the “lived experience” means at all. Pragmatism makes a claim on truth – the effects in this world and this life, how well this or that suits man in the here and now, this is the only reality or determiner of truth there – is the claim of pragmatism.

Pragmatism doesn't just emphasize “the practical,” it says that “the practical” is the supreme decider of what's right and good and true. The practical, as consequentialism and utilitarianism will help bring out, is that which man considers useful in the here and now. Is it “practical” to put men and women together in college dorms?

Well yeah – ok, so do it. Is it practical to kill unborn children who have Down’s Syndrome or Trisomy 18? Well, let’s see, in practical terms are they going to contribute to the satisfaction of material desires? No. Ok, well then yes of course, kill them. Same with older folks or those who have terminal illness. The group decides it’s not practical to keep them around or let them live so yes, of course, kill them. Euthanasia is becoming more and more widely accepted. Is it practical to get to Mass when I’m travelling? Well no – so of course it’s ok to just write it off. Begin to notice just how often and in how many ways people make “the practical” the supreme decider of what is right and good and true, even in small everyday things. Take even simple things like putting down salt in the winter time. Well it costs money and damages the cement, says the pragmatist with a great aura of authority and wisdom so no, it’s not right to put it down; if people fall, that’s their problem, maybe they should just stay home. The pragmatist rules the day in our country in many ways. As a person enshrines this mentality in their mind more and more, they necessarily move further and further away from God and closer and closer to atheism, maybe without even realizing it. What is “practical” *is* something to consider, indeed has to be considered, in everyday life but it is not the supreme decider of action, it is not the supreme decider of what is right and good and true. If we want to build a building, for example, we have to stop and think about “practical” things – starting with, for example, do we have funds to build it. Hopefully it is clear that it is not that practical things don’t have to be dealt with and considered, it is rather that “the practical” or the “lived experience” is not the supreme decider of what is right and good and true. Don’t be too quick to say: well no, of course I don’t believe that “the lived experience” or what is “practical” is the supreme decider of what’s right and good and true. The more a person thinks first and foremost in these terms, especially with an aura of great authority, the more they appeal to pragmatism and the more they help to spread atheism. The more a person refuses to ever raise their mind beyond “the practical” the more they lean towards pragmatism. Ask yourself this – how often do you think about getting to Heaven and what that takes? Does that really guide your thinking, or guide what you say and do in everyday life? Or is it mainly just “the practical?”

With this in mind, let us turn first to Bentham’s utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was an English “philosopher” and the progenitor of utilitarianism. Now Betham preceded Peirce (the original proponent of pragmatism) so we might say: well then pragmatism is not the father of utilitarianism. In terms of chronological development that is true. But in terms of how the isms fit together, we will see that utilitarianism can be seen as a category of the more general pragmatism. Perhaps it is that Peirce was influenced by Bentham.

Bentham basically took up the question of happiness, in particular maximizing human happiness. Bentham proposed that the purpose of life is to maximize “happiness.” That’s dangerously close to the truth. But did he think in terms of eternal life, of reaching the ultimate satisfaction of the unshakable human desire for happiness? Well of course not, that’s absurd to one possessed by materialism. In saying that the purpose of life is to maximize happiness, he means that the purpose of life is to maximize the satisfaction of my desires in the here and now. Sacrificing any desire in this life is done only if it maximizes the satisfaction of my desires later on. For example, a person might study hard (a sacrifice in itself) in college and even forgo some parties but only if it can be calculated that this will lead to “happiness” – wealth, power, prestige, etc – later down the road. What does pragmatism mean by “practical?” In large part, it means Bentham’s utilitarianism. Does having sexual relations outside of marriage maximize my “happiness” (or should we say pleasure) in this world and this life? If so, then of course do it because that (according to Bentham) is the very purpose of life! It probably doesn’t even need to be brought out how prevalent this mentality is now, at least in our own society. But it is often expressed in more subtle ways as well – beyond the gratification of immediate desires. How often have you heard someone say: oh, I just want my kids to be healthy and happy. Now of course, *of course*, no one wants to see their family members suffer, no one wants to see them unhealthy or unhappy. Our Holy Mother didn’t want this for her Son either; she did not desire His suffering but she did accept it because it was His (God’s) will, and then she suffered with Him. Coming back, now, to: I just want my kids to be healthy and happy – what is that really saying? Doesn’t it nearly always mean: in the here and now? Does it ever mean: willing to sacrifice self for the sake of getting to Heaven and thus attain perfect happiness? We will have to finish this the next time.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.