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# Gleanings

## Pragmatism



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When I studied physics, I learned that one of science's key objectives is to predict the future. This is accomplished using the timeless universal principles (TUP) that govern the physical universe. The reality of the existence of TUP is a seminal presupposition of science. The application of TUP, however, can be difficult.

For example, the simplest scenario is the interaction of two particles subject to either gravitational or electromagnetic forces. The equations describing this interaction are not highly complex, which means that for a given set of initial conditions, forecasting the future state of the particles at any point in time is fairly easy to compute. For three particles interacting, however, it is much more complex. And for anything beyond three particles, the equations become extremely complex. Therefore we can only accurately predict the simplest situations. The more complicated scenarios must be addressed heuristically using pragmatic approximations. This is the purview of fields such as statistical physics.

The workplace resembles the complexity of the three or more particle scenario. For example, there are many relationships, many principles of business (business has its own TUP), and many components to business operations. The many variables of business make mathematical precision arduous. Many, if not most, workplace scenarios must therefore be addressed pragmatically.

Informally, pragmatism has been with the human race since creation, but formally it arose as a philosophy in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In part, it was a reaction to naturalism, which posited that everything could be explained by natural causes. Naturalism had no need for a God hypothesis; therefore, it is fundamentally atheistic.

Atheism as a basis for a philosophy is discussed in the book *How Should We Then Live?* by Francis Schaeffer. He argues that the downfall of atheism is that it provides no satisfying answer to the question of life's meaning. The idea of meaning requires a creator to define meaning for his creation. Schaeffer goes on to assert that only biblical theism provides a credible answer to the question of meaning in life.

Philosophically, pragmatism assumes that the function of thinking is not to explain reality but to provide a basis for action. Because reality is so complicated, a mathematically robust explanation of reality is not feasible, so we should not focus on trying to understand and explain reality. We should simply focus on finding the practices that produce the desired results.

Biblical theism contends that life must be understood and lived in relationship to the Creator. Such a view does not dismiss the value of pragmatism. But, biblically, pragmatism's value is in helping man align with the will and ways of God. So where Scripture does not provide specific guidance in a situation, then pragmatism should be used congruent with Scripture.

Pragmatism is widely used by both atheists and theists. It is used in all areas of life, including business. The pedestrian assumption by business pundits is that the best practices of business are those that produce the most profit. This maxim is nearly universally accepted and seems to be rarely questioned. The assumption is that business has nothing to do with God; business is about making money. This assumption is inconsistent with a biblical worldview. The biblical worldview is that business is a means of discerning and aligning with the will of God (James 4:13–17).

Pragmatism is found in Scripture though sometimes it is not properly used. For example, John 18 records an incident during which Peter cut off the ear of one of the men who came to arrest Christ. This showed considerable boldness—those who came to arrest Jesus were numerous and well-armed. Then at three different times a few hours later, Peter denied that he knew Christ, which showed cowardliness. It appears that if Peter thought Jesus was in control, Peter was bold, but if he thought Jesus lost control, Peter was a coward. Given that Peter valued his life, he responded pragmatically to circumstances based on his perception of whether or not Jesus was in control. Peter assessed the two situations and responded based on what he thought he could do safely. Clearly, Jesus never lost control. He was always submitted to the Father's will. And

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the Father never loses control—even in the case of Jesus' death (Acts 2:22–24). So Peter's pragmatic view was inconsistent with the reality that Jesus is Lord of all people, in all circumstances, at all times, and in all places.

What happened to Peter happens to all humans. We are tempted to walk by sight rather than faith. When situations don't appear favorable to us, we tend to believe that God has abandoned us; therefore, at least momentarily, we must take matters in our own hands. In such cases, we function in unbelief and deny the veracity of Scripture. In this state we function as if pragmatism trumps Scripture.

But Jesus demonstrated the proper use of pragmatism; specifically, he used pragmatism congruent with Scripture. That is, Scripture trumps pragmatism. Consider the temptation of Jesus recorded in Matthew 4. The natural situation was grim. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for forty days and nights of fasting. When tempted to remedy his hunger by turning stones into bread, which Jesus could have done, Jesus responded with conviction and clarity. He would not do his will when his will was in conflict with God's will. For Jesus, Scripture trumped pragmatism.

On another occasion, Jesus used a pragmatic argument to explain discipleship (Luke 14:25–33). Drawing on his experience as a carpenter, he stated that to be a disciple one must count the cost similar to the way a person must count the cost to see if he can afford to build a project. While a calculation can be performed to help make a decision, the calculation will not be precise; it will be an approximation. Ultimately, one must make a judgment call, that is, a pragmatic decision. Therefore to be a disciple requires a pragmatic decision as to whether or not a person is willing and able to pay the price.

Jesus' use of pragmatism never trumped the authority of Scripture. Jesus recognized that pragmatism, biblically viewed, was a gift to man from God, who is not fully comprehensible by man (Isaiah 55:8). God provided a way for man, with a limited ability to comprehend the will and ways of God, to solve problems without having to fully understand everything.

When subordinated to a biblical worldview, pragmatism is a useful tool given to man by a benevolent God. But pragmatism viewed through a naturalistic or atheistic worldview simply emboldens man's rebellion against God.

When Scripture does not provide specific guidance on an issue, pragmatism subordinated to and congruent with Scripture can be helpful.

When issues arise that appear to be outside God's control or interest (neither of which is ever really true), there will be a temptation to think as Peter did, that is, to be bold when we are sure of God's involvement and to be cowardly when we are unsure. Walking by faith not by sight means that regardless of how difficult the situation may be, we will always trust God—his sovereignty over the universe and the veracity of Scripture—and never default to the cowardly position of walking by sight.

Build your understanding of and response to situations based on biblical thinking first, and when Scripture does not provide specific guidance, use pragmatism subordinated to Scripture to help you.

So when you are faced with an opportunity to use pragmatism, ask yourself: Does my pragmatically discerned response to this situation help me align with the will and ways of God? If you can truthfully answer yes, then you have properly used pragmatism.

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