Kant, Peirce, Dewey: on the Supremacy of Practice over Theory

Pragmatism is often considered as a philosophical perspective denying any sharp theory versus practice dichotomy, however it is also a perspective stressing the primacy of a point of view of practice. When tracked down in the history of philosophy traces of the later thesis lead to the passages of Kant's second critique on “the primacy of pure practical reason and its connection with the speculative.” Kant was a thinker who having made a sharp distinction between two capacities of the mind: the practical one and the speculative one, rejected the view that they can remain isolated. According to him, such an isolation would result in a conflict of reason with itself. Otherwise, when the supremacy of practical reason over the speculative is postulated, not only the agreement of the reason with itself is saved but also there is no damage done to the one of the most important tasks of the speculative reason, this is to “constraining speculative frivolity.” In Kant's view this primacy of practical reason is possible and even desirable because the reason in question is pure and insensitive to empirical determination of any sort (which is, according to Kant, always self love or personal happiness).

Now, when pragmatists stress the primacy of a point of view of practice they understand it in a different way than Kant did, at least for a few reasons. Firstly, the sharp dualism of two reason's capacities was crucial for Kant, however from Peirce to Rorty it can be observed its progressive fading away. If the conviction of the primacy of point of view of practice is to be held, some kind of distinction between theory and practice must be recognized, no matter how imprecise would it be, however in a pragmatist perspective there is no place for such a radical dichotomy. Secondly, the pragmatist conception of practice – however not homogeneous – has nothing to do with pure reason, in any of its versions. It includes various empirical aspects of human experience and actions. Thirdly, as the pragmatist view on theory-practice relation and the conception of practice are different than Kant's ones, motives for claiming the primacy of practice have to be different, as well. Indeed, this is so even in the case of Peirce – the most Kantian among pragmatist thinkers.

My aim in this paper is tripartite. Firstly, I shall analyse and compare Kant's, Peirce's, and Dewey's reasons for claiming the primacy of practice. I have chosen Peirce's and Dewey's positions among all pragmatist thinkers as (1) they are the most explicitly expressed and (2) they stay in interesting relation to each other (e.g. Peirce's and Dewey's discussion on Dewey's Studies in Logical Theory (1903) which in fact concerns the role of practice in human cognition processes). (3) Kantian roots of Peirce's philosophy are also significant.

Secondly, I shall attempt answering the questions: “What visions of human intellectual activity did Kant's, Peirce's, and Dewey's doctrines provide us with? Which one of them is most tempting for us today and why?” I am convinced that each of these three views has its strengths and weaknesses so the proper question is not “Which one is the best?” but rather “What can one gain and what can one lose, accepting rather one than the other of these three perspectives?”

Thirdly, as answers to the above questions reveal that the issue of theory-practice relation is not an abstract and strictly theoretical problem but this is in fact a meta-philosophical issue how to practice philosophy, I shall consider whether and how Kant's view on the capacities of the mind and their relation to each other could enrich the pragmatist view (which version of it? More Peircean or more Deweyan position?) on roles and ends of philosophy. Or maybe in spite of his (outwardly) pragmatist claim of the primacy of practice Kant's doctrine remains alien to the pragmatist spirit?

References