

Editorial

Skeptical Optimism and Pragmatism: Voyage of an Academic Omnivore

Robert D. Mather, Editor

Part 1

Charles S. Peirce contributed greatly to philosophy, mathematics, and psychology, among other areas. His ideas were the foundation for William James' brand of pragmatism, though James and others modified his original ideas. This prompted Peirce to change the term "pragmatism" to "pragmaticism." As he wrote:

"So then, the writer, finding his bantling "pragmatism" so promoted, feels that it is time to kiss his child good-by and relinquish it to its higher destiny; while to serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he begs to announce the birth of the word "pragmaticism," which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnapers" (Peirce, 1934, pp. 276-277).

In a 2008 keynote address at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, I challenged the audience to be "skeptical optimists" (Mather, 2008). I defined a skeptical optimist as "a scientist who uses the tools of skepticism to acquire knowledge inspired by positive expectancies." The idea is to use skepticism as a tool of scientific inquiry and to let optimism guide you in choosing ideas to test. This combination, I suggested, leads to creativity. Too much skepticism stifles creativity. Too much optimism leads a scientist down blind alley after blind alley. Balance between the two, is key. Use skepticism to test novel ideas. However, too frequently, systematic inquiry does not allow for creativity. It is far too easy to stand on the shoulders of giants and just take a peek, progressing knowledge ever so incrementally.

However, as Cohen noted when describing Peirce:

Remote from all these, however, are the intellectual rovers who, in their search for new fields, venture into the thick jungle that surrounds the little patch of cultivated science. They are not gregarious creatures, these lonely pioneers; and in their wanderings they often completely lose touch with those who tread the beaten paths. Those that return to the community often speak strangely of strange things; and it is not always that they arouse sufficient faith for others to follow them and change their trails into high roads (Peirce, 1968, p. vii).

Thus, I argue, skeptical optimism allows these intellectual rovers to explore the jungle. The optimism guides them into the jungle with the hope of survival, whereas the skepticism equips them to survive in the jungle. However, it is not enough to believe that one can survive in the jungle due to being correctly equipped intellectually. One must be tested before claiming survivability. Indeed, Peirce reflected on the necessary nature of action in this scenario that:

"Where hope is unchecked by any experience, it is likely that our optimism is extravagant" (Peirce, 1968, p. 11).

Thus, optimism is merely boastful, wishful thinking if not acted upon. Humans are built for action.

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Part 2

Peirce was appreciated by the greatest minds of his time and travelled extensively. Many of his prolific writings were unpublished during his lifetime, and the magnitude of his contributions was not yet fully realized. He was keenly aware of the role of collective evaluation in academic discourse. In his own words,

“Hence, if disciplined and candid minds carefully examine a theory and refuse to accept it, this ought to create doubts in the mind of the author of the theory himself” (Peirce, 1968, p. 3).

I have questioned my ideas in the face of criticism from the academy. However, skeptical optimism has helped me to push past the criticisms and use them to hone my ideas. It really is a beautiful, brutal process of conceptual selection in the scholarly academy.

Part 3

Peirce stated:

But let a man venture into an unfamiliar field, or where his results are not continually checked by experience, and all history shows that the most masculine intellect will oftentimes lose his orientation and waste his efforts in directions which bring him no nearer to his goal, or even carry him entirely astray. He is like a ship on the open sea, with no one on board who understands the rules of navigation. And in such a case some general study of the guiding principles of reasoning would be sure to be found useful (Peirce, 1968, pp. 12-13).

Thus, when armed with guiding principles of reasoning and good habits of mind, one can maintain course and explore new intellectual terrain.

Clyde Hendrick, the eminent social psychologist, author of 12 books and around 200 articles, once described me as an “Academic Omnivore.” He had worked with me for several years and was very pleased with himself for finally finding a term to appropriately describe me. At the time, I was at Texas Tech researching a number of issues. I worked for my advisor studying social automaticity, with another professor studying issues of visual perception, with another professor studying attitudes and persuasion, and with Dr. Hendrick studying evolutionary psychology. In addition to that, I was working on writing a statistics book with my former mentor from my master’s degree, Mike Knight (see Mather, 2011). My knowledge base was very diverse, which is unusual in graduate school when most students work with one professor and stick to learning one area of study in depth. Even at the time, I was fighting to be a generalist in a specialist’s world. Both of those mentors were special—Dr. Hendrick and Dr. Knight were both generalists. I suspect that Dr. Hendrick was pleased because he found a term to describe himself as well (he also called me a “research whore,” but it is harder to write an appropriate speech around that phrase). My advisor, Darcy Reich, is also a generalist, though at that point in her young career she didn’t yet know it.

My journey as a generalist began as a child. My father is a biology professor and my mother is an education professor. Skepticism and optimism at its finest! Both taught at a small liberal arts college, and I learned skeptical optimism as a perspective, though it was left to me to construct it as a concept from my experiences. As a kid, I occasionally sat in college courses of interest with my mother while she finished her degree. I accompanied my father on scientific field trips, gathering an assortment of specimens. Both my mother and father taught me to read. My mom taught me the idea of the importance of reading, whereas my father quietly demonstrated to me the importance of reading. I am grateful to be employed at a job that requires me to read frequently. Literacy is the greatest skill I have.

Westminster College was a perfect fit for my undergraduate education. I challenged myself to take advantage of the intellectual community, and majored in psychology with minors in political science and religious studies. I also took quite a few biology classes. I believed that if I was going to spend a great deal of time studying something every semester, I should take classes that interested me. Such classes were rarely within my skill set, so I studied very hard as an undergraduate with very little success. If I made a 70% in a class, I still remember all 70%—I doubt many students remember as much from each class as I do. Though the payoff wasn’t immediate, it has paid great dividends in my role as a professor.

At Westminster, the classes were small, the tests were essays, and I was surrounded by intellectually stimulating peers. There were many internship opportunities, and Dr. Perkowski even held up class and called my dorm room early during my first semester when my roommate and I missed our alarms. We awoke to a phone call 10 minutes into class that said simply, “Are you OK? We are all waiting on you.” Such a simple gesture from a

professor typified the Westminster academic experience. And by the way, I am not nearly as nice as a professor, but I certainly value those who are!

I learned much from my professors at Westminster. From Kurt Jefferson, I learned how to maintain enthusiasm and excitement for content during 8 AM classes. Most people probably don't characterize Dr. Jefferson as "enthusiastic and excited" but it is certainly there if you look for it. From Bob Hansen, I learned compassion and optimism. From Bill Young, I learned how to reflect deeply on philosophical questions. From David Jones, I learned how to teach as a young, new professor who looks like the students. From Ted Jaeger, I learned how to make students think critically and engage them in learning through the application of concepts. These are merely words—I continue to strive to match Dr. Jaeger's skills at teaching psychology, and he was probably the most profound influence on my early teaching career. From Douglas Fickess, I learned the valuable lesson of how to push students hard and get the most out of them. From him, I learned how to manage a classroom, how to engage students and hold them to a high standard even in the hallways between classes.

Part 4

All of these experiences have a similar theme—they provided me with the freedom to think. Take advantage of those opportunities, surround yourself with people who challenge you, and arm your critical thinking quiver with slings of skepticism as you boldly and optimistically enter the thick jungle around your chosen intellectual realm. If you do these things, you will generate great ideas.

Stretch your mind, challenge yourself, and study that which you find hard to study. Let systematic inquiry be the guiding principle of your knowledge acquisition, regardless of whether you study English Literature, Political Science, Philosophy, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, or Psychology.

Read broadly, think boldly, and specialize in being a generalist (within a specialization, of course). And when you return from your adventure, please, as Cohen said of Peirce, "speak strangely of strange things."

References

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