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# ***TRANSITION, ACTION, & EDUCATION: REDIRECTING PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION***

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## **Abstract**

*Recent developments in contemporary pragmatist thought have the potential to help reshape our understandings of pragmatism in philosophy of education. We first survey the development of pragmatism as founded in experience, moving through linguistic pragmatism, to a newer –actionistic approach in conduct pragmatism. Conduct pragmatism prioritizes action over both experience and discursive thought in ways that can be central to educational activity and projects. Conduct pragmatism so conceived has the potential to alter and shift how philosophers of education relate to pragmatist thought and in the second section we outline some of these potentials. We indicate the possibilities for pragmatist philosophy of education to engage with diverse bodies of thought, moving away from an insular focus on one or two philosophers, and a diversity of locations where philosophy is active and conducted.*

**Keywords** transitionalist pragmatism; classical pragmatism; neopragmatism; conduct

pragmatism; actionistic pragmatism; William James; John Dewey;

## §0: TRANSITIONALIST PRAGMATISM

An underdeveloped thread runs through every important phase in the history of pragmatism.

This is the thread of flux, process, or transition. Throughout its development, and perhaps most especially in the present, pragmatism is at its best as a philosophy of transitions.<sup>1</sup>

The best, if not also the most poetic, summary of the transitionalist spirit of pragmatism is found in a line from William James: “Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn” (1904, 212). According to James, the very stuff of our lives is dynamic through and through. Our thinkings, feelings, and doings are becomings—our conceptions, sensations, and actions are transitional materials.

Pragmatism’s emphasis on the transitional dynamics of temporality and historicity has received different inflections in different phases of pragmatism’s history. Consider that history up to the present, which can be briefly summarized as a sequence of two competing, even if interrelated, philosophical perspectives: the *experience pragmatism* of first-generation pragmatists like John Dewey, and the *linguistic pragmatism* of later-generation neopragmatists like Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom. In first-wave classical experientialist pragmatism, the key concept of experience was always figured as essentially subject to change and always in the midst of changing. To the extent that classical pragmatism was a cousin of classical empiricism, it was always a process empiricism, and as such contrasted sharply with the epistemology of fixity that dominated more dominant empiricisms. In more recent second-wave lingualist pragmatism, the central notions of languages and vocabularies are always construed as essentially transformable.

As Robert Brandom puts it, “Every application of a concept develops its content” (2000, 157).

Brandom’s rationalist pragmatism is exemplarily more proximate to the historicist idealism of a Hegel than the eternalist rationalism of a Leibniz or Descartes.

If the transitionalist perspective holds everything in flux, some materials are nevertheless more amenable to a fluxist or transitionalist interpretation than others. Consider the three central notions of almost all modern philosophies including pragmatism: concept (closely connected to language), sense (closely connected to experience), and action (or doing). It is the last of these three, our doings, that deserve a privileged place within a philosophical perspective that would propose to be in dynamic flux. On this basis, we here emphasise the underexplored potentiality of a third, as yet underdeveloped, option within pragmatism’s history: *pragmatism as a (transitionalist) philosophy of conduct*. What we call *conduct pragmatism* promises a more thoroughly transitional philosophy than that thus far achieved by *experiential pragmatism* or *linguistic pragmatism*.

Action is undeniably flowing or transitional in a way that sensational experience and rational conceptuality need not be. It would never occur to anyone to suggest that action does not take time, whereas the history of modern philosophy is in many ways a history of successive attempts to freeze the moment of sensation (in classical empiricism) or of conception (in classical rationalism). With this in view, we here develop an argument for leveraging an actionistic pragmatism out of a transitionalist pragmatism.

Indeed pragmatism would have seemed to offer, if anything at all, an impulse to give philosophical priority to action. Beginning at *πρᾶγμα* (*pragma*), an Ancient Greek word connoting “deed” or “thing done”, pragmatism seeks to explicate the meanings and values of our

conceptions in terms of their consequences for conduct. The prioritization of action central to pragmatism would suggest that it offers a theoretical apparatus that would be especially well-suited to the philosophical interrogation of those domains where action is central. If so, this would involve an extremely wide brief.

Despite being seemingly so central to pragmatism, even if only in name, action has not been the primary site of attention for philosophical pragmatism since its inception over a century ago.

Why has this been the case? The first two waves of pragmatism, those emphasizing experience (or sense) and language (or concept), have perhaps been the subject of so much attention and energy from within pragmatist thought because of their intimacy with existing mainstream philosophical options. Dewey (1925) always presented his experience pragmatism as close kin to, even if an important variation on, the classical empiricisms of modern philosophy. Later linguistic pragmatism bears more than passing affinities with classical modern rationalism, as plainly evidenced in Robert Brandom's development of a "rationalist pragmatism" (2001, 11) that is proximate to modern idealisms. By contrast, action remains an underdeveloped option both within pragmatism and across modern philosophy.

If all of this is correct, or even only possibly correct, developing pragmatism's emphasis on conduct or action would seem to offer a promising way of breaking free from the impasses of modern philosophy's swing between tough empiricism and idealizing rationalism. We explore the theoretical promise of this approach to pragmatism in §1. Following this, we turn in §2 to options within philosophy of education that a transitionalist-actionistic approach to pragmatism opens up.

## §1: ACTIONISTIC PRAGMATISM

This section elaborates what might be called an *actionistic pragmatism* or what one of us has called in recent work, building off of the nineteenth-century English vernacular within which pragmatism itself emerged, a *conduct pragmatism* (Koopman 2014).<sup>2</sup> Both appellations seem already redundant in light of pragmatism's *πρᾶγμα*. Unfortunately, they are not. Much of the history of pragmatism has lost sight of the conduct and action that is promised a central place in this philosophy. Fortunately, more recent pragmatisms have shown the symptoms of a certain restlessness with the received experientialist and lingualist approaches of prior pragmatisms. It is time to turn that restlessness into a positive account. This means accepting that, and understanding why, what matters *most* for pragmatism is neither experience nor language, but rather action.

### §1.A: ACTION IN PAST PRAGMATISMS

One way of proposing conduct pragmatism would be by way of an interpretive exposition of the emphasis that the category has received in the history of pragmatism. This subsection offers an abbreviated such exposition.

George Herbert Mead summarized the overall spirit of conduct pragmatism in stating that, “The point that needs particularly to be recognized in an approach to the pragmatic doctrine is the relationship of thinking to conduct” (1936, 344). For Mead, the point of pragmatism was not so much that it located the criterion of truth in success, but rather that it located the criterion of success in action. The point of pragmatism is therefore that “the test of [the hypothesis] is that you can continue the sort of conduct that was going on” (1936, 349). Mead was perhaps clearer than any other pragmatist that the emphasis of the method is on action freed up and potent in

contrast to the debilitating of inaction. Turning from Mead to the early pragmatisms of Charles Peirce and especially William James helps us flesh this out.

The emergence of pragmatist philosophy is frequently traced back to a series of articles authored by Peirce in a series for the *Popular Science Monthly* in 1877 and 1878. The second of these articles, titled “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, set forth the following methodological rule:

“Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (1878, 132). This is the rule later reformulated by James as “the principle of pragmatism” (1898, 348). The pragmatist quintessence of the rule is in Peirce’s emphasis on “practical bearings.” Peirce thereby sought to refocus philosophical debates on practices. This strategy, of course, opens up a debate concerning how the pragmatist can best get analytical grip on practice. On the preceding page of his essay Peirce gave a solid hint as to how we should take his “practical bearings” when he wrote that, “the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action” (1878, 131). Peirce’s initial pragmatism is an actionistic pragmatism. Thus James in 1898 could confidently state Peirce’s principle as follows: “To develop a thought’s meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance” (1898, 348). Peirce did not always agree with James’s restatements of his views, but he did appreciate the benefit of James’s endorsements (as well as his continued attempts to land Peirce opportunities to lecture and teach), in fact so much so that he eventually proposed changing his middle name from Sanders to Santiago (referring to Saint James) as a sign of his gratitude. Taking a cue from Peirce’s actions more than his words, consider now James and his role in the inception of pragmatism.

One finds in the early writings of James the fullest-yet elaborations of pragmatism's actionistic perspective. But why emphasise James's early work? What gets lost in James's later work? And when and how can we mark this divide? If we take as our focus James's writings of the 1880s and 1890s up until around 1897, we find his work returning again and again to the category of conduct. It is only after 1897 that James's philosophical center shifted from conduct or action to the more experience-centric or sensation-focused approach for which he is more often remembered today, in large part because of a reception history which tends to read James's pragmatism through Dewey's empiricist naturalism. If the later James's experience pragmatism culminates in the radical empiricist metaphysics of his *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), the early James's conduct pragmatism is at its apex in a series of articles on will and willfulness from the 1880s.

One place from which to glean James's early conduct-first pragmatism is his 1888 *Scribner's* article "What the Will Effects," which was later incorporated into the "Will" chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*. In this piece James sought to press the importance of the reflex arc concept: "the only *essential* point in which 'the new Psychology' is an advance upon the old, is, it seems to me, the very general, and by this time very familiar notion, that all our activity belongs at bottom to the type of reflex action.... Viewed in this light the thinking and feeling portions of our life seem little more than half-way houses towards behavior; and recent Psychology accordingly tends to treat consciousness more and more as if it existed only for the sake of the conduct which it seems to introduce, and tries to explain its peculiarities (so far as they can be explained at all) by their practical utility" (1888, 240).

A little earlier, in an 1884 essay, James affirmed that "conduct, and not sensibility, is the ultimate fact for our recognition" (1884, 604). In an 1882 essay he similarly wrote, facing now not

sensation but thought, that, “Cognition, in short, is incomplete until discharged in act” (1882 quoted in 1890, I.314). We can add these two claims together by way of James’s conception of the person, which was rooted in a common idea in late-nineteenth century psychology, itself rooted in the widespread triad of modern philosophy noted above: cognition, sensation, and action. In this context, we can see the importance of James’s view that conduct deserves priority over, but not to the exclusion of, both sensibility and cognition.

James’s conduct pragmatism is especially perspicuous in an essay that is perhaps his most interesting statement on conduct as it could figure as central for pragmatism. James’s 1881 “Reflex Action and Theism” is a particularly interesting text in that performs a double duty that is often the call of James’s writings. It elaborates both a naturalistic conception of the person, and it also attempts to draw a theistic conclusion. What is of interest for us here, however, is James’s early statement of a conduct-centered conception that might not only have been useful for the concerns of his context, but which might also prove helpful for more contemporary demands and needs.

Two crucial points anchor James’s essay. Together they form the theoretical challenge which pragmatism can be read as a response to.

The first crucial point concerns the above-noted three-part conception of the person. James described our human nature as a “triad, neither of whose elements has any independent existence” (1881, 114). The triad consists of sensation, reflection, and action—or sense, concept, and act. It is crucial for James that the conception he is developing must affirm the irreducibility of each of these poles to the other. James’s pragmatism thus stands in contrast to the blown-up philosophical systems of classical modernity: most notably empiricism, which

would reduce reflection and action to sensation, and rationalism, which would reduce the other two to reflection.

The second crucial point is, in coordination with the first, what makes pragmatism an attempt at an answer to an exceedingly difficult question. James refused reductionism, but this would be easy for any theoretical perspective that refused to give priority to one of the three poles.

However, James's argument relies on the idea that we must prioritize one of the poles just insofar as we recognise a distinction between experiential sensation, rational reflection, and the work of conduct. For insofar as there is a distinction, there are bound to be instances where those distinct elements come into conflict. When they do, we need to be able to prioritize one of the poles as having greater methodological purchase than the others. James's pragmatism, at least in this earlier phase, would prioritize the pole of action. He wrote that, "The current of life which runs in at our eyes or ears is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips.... The willing department of our nature, in short, dominates both the conceiving department and the feeling department; or, in plainer English, perception and thinking are only there for behavior's sake" (1881, 114). Action, as James elaborated his argument, is the privileged pole because it is the one pole that is invariably dynamic, and thus able to keep itself in motional connection with the other two poles. Thus he wrote: "Transformation is effected in the interests of our volitional nature, and for no other purpose whatsoever" (1881, 117). In privileging either of the other two poles, we risk losing mobility and connectivity. The empiricist is unable to account for the relationship between sensation and the work of thought, let alone the role of sensation in action. And the rationalist is unable to account for how the pinnacle pole of reason relates to our sense impressions, let alone the relation of reason to action. James prioritised conduct, then, because it

flows. Conduct is the stream through which the other poles of sensation (feeling, experience) and reflection (thought, discourse) maintain their mobility.

### **§1.B: ACTION, LANGUAGE, & EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY PRAGMATISM**

In building out a contemporary pragmatist perspective on the basis of James's early suggestions, the advantages of the conduct option is that it attunes us to the vicissitudes of flow and flux. As the in-parts-pragmatist analytic philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright wrote, "Acts... are essentially connected with changes.... A necessary requirement of a Logic of Action is therefore a Logic of Change" (1963, vii). From the pragmatist perspective, von Wright's reminder is important insofar as it emphasises the essentially transitional quality of action, a point on which action stands in sharp contrast to our tendencies to find ways of freezing up conception and sensation such that they so readily seem so stand still. Action simply cannot be made to stay put. It is, as if ineluctably, always on the go.

These are crucial insights in light of the way in which pragmatism, both as a historical tradition and as a contemporary perspective, invites the three philosophical options we have been noting thus far. Experience, language, conduct. Feeling, thinking, willing. Sensation, conception, action.

Two of these options have been explored by prior pragmatisms in exquisite detail: those of experience pragmatism and linguistic pragmatism. And yet it is the third, still in wait of its detailed philosophical exposition and deployment, that is the perspective that would seem to be at the heart of pragmatism, at least taken literally. It is also the third option which presents a decisive advantage in terms of the transitionalist thread that runs throughout pragmatism. For try as pragmatists might, the work of turning experience and language into dynamic flows has not

proven successful—these notions continually make themselves available to critics of pragmatism as still states. On the contrary, try as critic of pragmatism might, they cannot freeze conduct—for the notion itself is bound to that which onwardly flows; there is no action that sits still. Of the major pragmatist options on the table today, then, only one of these cannot be developed statically such that it presses pragmatism into service as an essentially transitionalist perspective.

Yet what if the pragmatist were to persist by declining to give priority to transitionalism? Why not remain within the two perspectives already adumbrated by previous pragmatisms? Why not conserve experience pragmatism? Why not sit with linguistic pragmatism? Posed from a position that does not assume, as we have here, the brief of transitionalist pragmatism, these are crucial questions in their own right. Since we do not have the space here to rehearse arguments that have been made in detail elsewhere (see Koopman [2009, 2014]), we offer only a summary statement on these matters.

Experience pragmatism is on the retreat at present above all because of its inability to offer a plausible account of normative phenomena. An emphasis on experience seems to inescapably lead to a relativization to first-person perspectives. Though a chief concern of pragmatism has always been the sociality of the self, the emphasis on experience and sensation that inflected early pragmatism did a great disservice to the gains that pragmatism otherwise would have made by way of sociality. Experience has proven a notion that is too tightly wound up with first-person authority to be of value to the kind of third-person social perspective that pragmatism has also always kept in view. The extent to which experience cannot escape from first-personal relativization is also the extent to which experience fails to provide any workable basis for normativity. For a first-person perspective is one from which we cannot develop a viable account of normative correctness, be it in the moral domain of the good and the right, the

political domain of justice, or the epistemological domain of knowledge. In short, to take this last case as exemplary, experience is an extremely weak basis upon which to distinguish between knowledge and ignorance—insofar as experience is radically underdetermined it is always open to revisionary interpretations that can lead two different inquirers to exactly opposite conclusions on the basis of identical experiences.

Linguistic pragmatism cannot be sustained in the present moment above all because of its exceedingly restrictive scope of attention. If experience pragmatism appears too unrestrictive in opening itself up to unworkable relativization, then linguistic pragmatism's risks fall on the other side of the perspective. A chief defect of any lingualist philosophy is its inability to come into contact with that which resists linguistic articulation. For instance, linguistic pragmatisms have been repeatedly observed to come up short precisely where experience pragmatisms flourish, namely with respect to the revelatory and transformative capacities of the sensorium. There is much that we see, hear, taste, and feel that cannot be exactly consolidated linguistically. A lingualist perspective, because of its explicit restriction, cannot answer to the work that such sense material plays in our practices. The point is not that any linguistic turn philosophy has ever denied the reality of sense-experience. The point, rather, is just that linguistic turn philosophy tends to fail to do anything productive when it comes to sense-experience.

If the foregoing is correct, the chief methodological challenge facing pragmatist philosophy today can be stated as follows: *we find ourselves in need of a perspective that refuses to totalize either experience (resulting in what might be called "experientialism") or thought (resulting in what might be call "idealism" or "lingualism" or "textualism"), and which prioritizes conduct over experience and thought (pragmatism).* The actionistic analytics of conduct pragmatism is one such perspective.

According to this actionistic perspective, it's all motion. That which seems unchangeable is always somehow already becoming something other than it just was. Nothing is unmoving, though there is much that appears this way because it moves at an exceedingly slow rate of change. But nothing is forever sat still. Stillness is rather that which shifts slowly. Seen from the other side, as it were, is the unstable. Instability is just that which moves quickly. Thus that which is unstable is not a chaos or a pure disorder. That which appears chaotic is just that which moves much more quickly than can be acted upon, comprehended, and sensed. Declining a perspective that presupposes eternity, pragmatism sees everything in terms of varying rates of change. Everything becomes a matter of the fast and the slow—quickenings and lingerings.

The transitional-actionistic perspective is not always requisite—it could never be established as an unvarying foundation for inquiry. The point, rather, is just this: one might be looking at something when one looks in freeze frame, but one cannot see in any such frame that which folds into it and unfolds out of it. To put our frames into motion, to gear inquiry to mobility, conduct offers a facilitating analytical perspective. It is in this sense that conduct, and a conduct-first pragmatism, is fit for an analytics of transitions.

## **§2: TRANSITIONALIST-ACTIONISTIC PRAGMATISM AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

In the preceding section, we have elaborated the desirability of a conduct pragmatism that

emphasises the neglected dimension of action, hitherto sidelined in pragmatist philosophies taking experience and reflection as their center. Emphasising action, seeing sensation and language through their applicability to action whilst remaining mindful of historical relationships, allows us to focus on transition. We are invited thereby to consider transition as an analytic for social inquiry that focuses on variability in rates of change for aggregative and atomistic dynamic structures.

## **§2.A. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

One feature of a transitionalist account initially noteworthy for philosophy of education is its decentering of Dewey. James features far more prominently in our account (and it was, we now wish to make explicit, a kind of pragmatist experiment to see if we could develop the account in the preceding section without a single citation of Dewey as a source).<sup>3</sup> In surveying recent scholarship on pragmatism in philosophy of education, in specialist journals as well as more generalist education publications, one sees pragmatism in education as ‘Dewey Studies’ with only occasional treatments of other pragmatists. A great number of papers are interpretations of his philosophy (Papestephanou 2017), or reinterpretations in the light of both contemporary concerns (Saito 2002, Vorsino 2015, Biesta 2010) and other philosophers (Garrison 2017, Colapietro 2007, Higgins 2010), or attempts to re-establish Deweyan philosophy (Garrison et al. 2012, Gordon 2016). Dewey continues to retain a considerable influence on the sub-field of philosophy for children, mostly because of the concern for community and democracy in the development of shared sustained thinking (Johansson 2018). Exceptions to the concern with Dewey include the influence of Peirce, especially on edusemiotics (Semetsky 2014, Stables 2014, Strand 2014, Olteneau 2014, Pesce 2014; also Strand 2005, Thayer-Bacon 2005), and work in which Saito and Standish have consistently invited consideration of Emerson, Putnam

and Cavell (Cavell and Standish 2012, Saito and Standish 2014).<sup>4</sup> In much of this work, James has been neglected, and needlessly so.

Moving from sources to reception, the transitionalist perspective on pragmatism is beginning to be engaged by philosophers of education (Narey 2012, Mahon 2014, Nolan & Stitzlen 2010).

Welcome though this is, it can also lead at times to missed opportunities. Consider a recent paper in this journal by Higham (2018), who offers a sympathetic interpretation of transitionalist pragmatism as he sets out to establish why philosophers of education should value a dialogic ontology. For Higham the appeal of dialogic ontology is that it re-establishes the usefulness of growth metaphors in educational thinking.<sup>5</sup> Higham explicitly denies that dialogic ontology is a metaphysics, but from the perspective of a transitionalist articulation of the history of pragmatism, we might identify in this perspective a subtle shift that cannot but be drawn toward metaphysics. It is not clear to us how one might show, as Higham hopes to, that pragmatism is marred by a “lack” of “ontological soil” (Higham [2018], 9) without that absence being accounted for as a metaphysical need, that is, an unchanging need, or a need for something that always remains the same. More specifically, Higham’s dialogic ontology features the unaided assumptions that there is a subject who makes meaning, and that this subjectivity grounds the process of coming together to establish meaning. On that basis, we might worry that Higham’s position is susceptible to the same concerns that a transitionalist pragmatism would levy against previous pragmatists who unwittingly sought unchanging foundations (in, for example, experiential or conceptual capacities) for the generation of meaning.

Higham’s insights, productive as they are in other ways, thus perhaps miss one of the central upshots of a reframing of pragmatism as *transition*, and so also the correlative emphasis on *action* further developed here. Higham is focused on showing why ontological considerations are

still necessary, that is, something about which one cannot be productively agnostic. However, if we take a stronger, more radical, reading of pragmatism's transitionalism, we can follow pragmatism to implications that have wider applicability. A more radical reading refuses to presuppose any stable shape of subjectivity. In making that move, pragmatism can genuinely retain an ontological agnosticism such that the sites of transitions and actionistics are not necessarily restrained to being individual humans. This is an account that allows for (as we explore in the next section) pan- and intra- humanisms. This is a pragmatism that opens up the ontology of agency and multiplies possible answers to the ever-present question of 'who' the subject of action is. Not only 'who' is taken as an actor, but also 'what' counts as action or conduct itself, is a matter of where boundaries are negotiated and drawn—this work can never be finished and is always ongoing such that the very field of analysis is one that is always pervaded by contingency. This is where a transitionalist-actionistic pragmatism might lead us if we push as far as we can on its ontologically-agnostic emphases on temporality.<sup>6</sup>

## **§2.B NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

This final subsection, composed in a rather speculative manner, outlines three potential opportunities for pragmatist philosophy of education we find in a transitionalist-actionistic approach to pragmatism. This outlining is neither exhaustive nor definitive. It is itself in transition, offered in full awareness of that status, and hence is experimental.

The first opportunity for transitionalist-actionistic pragmatism can be found in recent contributions in the philosophy of education focusing on new materialism. In Barad's canonical phrase "relata do not preexist relations," (Barad 2003:815) we find (an evidently unconscious) echo of James's radical empiricism, specifically his claim that "relations between things [or

relata], conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves” (1909, 7; comment added). Barad specifically invites us to consider the role of material agency in the production of relata. Agency is no longer the sole preserve of certain types of self-conscious reflective human animals. Agency becomes a broader category—a broadening facilitated by a pragmatist emphasis on action as taking priority over thought or sense. In new materialist work, similarly, agentic power is extended and distributed. For Braidotti (2011), for example, the interrogation of how figurations (subjectivities) are produced can be inimical to understanding and engaging with a more diffuse situation.

Considering such theoretical openings, we are particularly interested in how Stengel (2018) has recently found ways to explicitly position transitionalist pragmatism within these contemporary trends by drawing on exemplary new materialist work by Haraway (2016). Stengel thereby offers an anti-dualist and process-centered vision of critical pragmatism and new materialism such that representational idioms can no longer claim privilege over affect and performance in governing action. Stengel, in tracing a Spinozist line through both contemporary pragmatism and new materialism, effectively bridges the two bodies of thought in ways we find doubly productive. First, Stengel follows Haraway in advocating for a “‘suspension of ontologies and epistemologies’ in favor of ‘experimental natural histories’” (Stengel [2018] quoting Haraway [2016, 88]).<sup>7</sup> Second, Stengel brings to the fore the mattering of transactive relating to develop an account of agency that is inherently transactive. Both of these aspects of Stengel’s work appear to us to offer, in her phrase, “resources [...] for response-able worlding together” (2018: 20). They are also, we think, especially valuable when interpreted through the lens of an actionistic pragmatism. Agency, for instance, is transactive when assessed in terms of dynamics

that form the background out of which order is composed and correlative orders that are subject to ongoing dynamics of recomposition.

A second opportunity can be located through a defining characteristic of transitionalist pragmatism: its emphasis on direction. As an individual teacher with a strong interest in Philosophy with Children, one of us (DG) has for some time been concerned with Biesta's charge of instrumentalist production of learner subjectivities in Philosophy with Children practices (in the broadest sense). For Biesta (2011), natality or the freedom to reveal oneself in the world is a defining value of just forms of education, particularly in a world that would have you otherwise. How then might an educator act purposefully yet without being teleological, working towards a prespecified end goal that closes down possibility? Practitioners often have strong normative preferences for children to be 'thus' rather than 'this': rational, considerate, critical, and so on. The counter-argument is that pedagogues need not be frightened of their authority, founded in knowledge and hopefully wisdom, to consciously shape in a particular direction rather than leave matters to what the psychoanalysts term the 'shadow' (that not addressed in reflective consciousness and therefore operating in subtle and possibly terrible ways).

Our position is that right now in the world there are more than enough authoritarian tendencies, whose educational manifestation is an epiphenomenon of broader social and political machinations. We share with Biesta a committed concern to make a space of possibility for the natality of children, deriving from his reading of Arendt (1958). What transitionalist-actionistic pragmatism offers to such a project is a way of addressing the unconscious reproduction of subjectivities. By focusing on meliorism, whose purpose is philosophical hope, we can then take a step back and consider the production of subjectivities and their possible relationships, for this

work of production and its temporality form a crucial context within which the melioristic impulse plays out. This does not mean of course a return to laissez-faire progressivism, the stereotype characterisation wielded by more epistemologically authoritarian visions of schooling, since purpose is unavoidable simply by fact of being in a situation requires an understanding of how one has got there and where one is going. So again we have arrived at a concern for teaching as travel, as ongoing; it is all transition, which is to say, it is all action.

One final hope for transitionalist education, building on elements of both natality and materiality, is that it offers the possibility of an alternative to reflection as the dominant mode of being professional. Emphasising the temporalist conditions of the possibility of transition brings the attention of the pedagogue away from themselves and the mirrored surface. Instead we might move to a more diffuse sense of agency where one see the production of phenomena as an instance of active forces, extended to both linguistic and experiential dimensions, whose vitality reveals the possibility of hope, and of hope renewed (Koopman 2006). Reflection in itself is not a sufficient condition for good action. It is too underpowered. What a transitionalist and actionistic pragmatism offers is a more committed and engaged sense of what it is to act and inquire into how to make things better. That can only be relevant for education.

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## ENDNOTES

1. A conception of pragmatism as a philosophy of transition is developed in detail in Koopman (2009); for a resonant interpretation of pragmatism see Margolis (2002).
2. For a similar interpretation of the pragmatic method see Jackman (2016).
3. There are, of course, many passages in Dewey from which such a view could be sourced. In his primary contribution to philosophy of education, *Democracy and Education*, he provides an actionistic perspective on education in, for example, his claims that, “things as they enter into action furnish the educative conditions of daily life” (1916, 37), and that “the method of teaching is the method of an art, of action intelligently directed by ends” (1916, 170).
4. One final significant group of papers concerns pragmatism as an approach to educational research. Here ‘pragmatism’ begins to shade into less philosophically exact usage as a synonym for ‘practical’ but within philosophy of education treatments retain a fidelity to the American philosophical tradition; see for recent examples Feinberg (2015), Shuffelton (2015), and Ellison (2010).
5. That growth metaphors are contentious is not obvious until we remind ourselves that teleological growth metaphors are indeed problematic. This line of thought derives from Biesta’s reading of Arendt (1958) and Hannam (2019) (although this reading is not without criticism, see most recently Murriss [2018]) as radical commitments to openness in the pedagogical encounter. For an elaboration of concerns with pragmatist strategies centered on progressivist notions of growth see also Sheehey (2019).
6. Pragmatism so pushed leads to, among other perspectives explored below, that of Latour (2005).
7. Working out in finer detail how natural histories (new materialist or otherwise) and critical pragmatism relate is a goal for future research. One of us is exploring related methodologies in recent work developing a genealogy of data subjectivity (Koopman, 2019/forthcoming).