

# Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Vitality

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## Classical Pragmatism and its Varieties: On a Pluriform Metatheoretical Perspective for Knowledge Organization

### Abstract

Pragmatism is a metatheoretical perspective within knowledge organization (KO) deriving from an American philosophical tradition active since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its core feature is commitment to the evaluation of the adequacy of concepts and beliefs through the empirical test of practice: this entails epistemological antifoundationalism, fallibilism, contingency, social embeddedness, and pluralism. This article reviews three variants of Pragmatism historically influential in philosophy—Peirce's scientifically oriented pragmatism, James's subjectivist practicalism, and Dewey's socially-directed instrumentalism—and indicates points of contact with KO theories propounded by Bliss, Shera, and Hjørland. KO applications of classical Pragmatism have tended to converge toward a socially pluralist model characteristic of Dewey. Recently, Rorty's epistemologically radical brand of Neopragmatism has found adherents within KO: whether it provides a more advantageous metatheoretical framework than classical Pragmatism remains to be seen.

### Introduction

In recent years, researchers within library and information science (LIS) have increasingly come to reflect on the field's metatheories—i.e., the sets of general philosophical assumptions underlying individual theories and practices—in the hope of identifying perspectives especially fruitful for guiding research and practice within the field (e.g., Hjørland 1998, Bates 2005). The LIS subfield of knowledge organization (KO), in particular, has witnessed a vigorous debate concerning metatheoretical issues, centering on the different epistemological positions informing the design of knowledge organization systems (KOSs) (e.g., Hjørland 2003, 105–107; Siringaglia 2002; Tennis 2008, 103–104). One metatheoretical perspective that has received considerable attention among KO researchers is Pragmatism (e.g., Gallagher 1991, Jacob 2000, Hjørland 2005– ), a philosophical tradition that originated in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, enjoyed its heyday from the 1890s to the 1940s, and, after a period of neglect, has undergone a notable revival in a number of humanistic and social-scientific fields from the early 1980s to the present (Dickstein 1999). In light of its origins, philosophical Pragmatism can be considered to constitute a North American contribution to the metatheory of KO, albeit one whose current vogue within the field owes much to impulses from Scandinavian scholarship (e.g., Hjørland 1997; Thellefsen & Thellefsen 2004).

The core defining feature of Pragmatism is the epistemological tenet that the meaning of a concept or the truth of a statement is to be evaluated with reference to "the experiential or practical consequences of its application" (Haack 2003, 774). Pragmatists seek to establish knowledge claims with reference to human action in, and experience of, the ambient world—that is to say, to determine which beliefs count as knowledge by considering how they work when put to the empirical test of practice. To put a concept or belief to the test is

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