

CHAPTER THREE

HUB ZWART

PHILOSOPHICAL TOOLS AND TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS

Comments on L. Hickman

Like Larry Hickman in his paper, let me first of all offer a disclaimer. I am not a Dewey expert, and I never studied pragmatism in a systematic manner. But I am aware of the fact that the methodology I myself rely on in my own work, my methodological *attitude* so to speak, has a number of things in common with the pragmatic approach put forward by Larry Hickman in his interesting and inspiring contribution.

I am a disciple of Michel Foucault and in my brief comment on what Larry Hickman suggests I want to reflect on the extent to which Foucault's philosophical style may be regarded as the French version of pragmatism - as *pragmatisme français* so to speak.

If we compare the methodology of Dewey with that of Foucault, a number of similarities present themselves. To start with, Foucault describes his philosophy *not* as a system or a theory, but as a set of philosophical *tools*, as a philosophical toolbox. Moreover, the notion of experimentation plays an important role in his philosophy as well. Furthermore, technical metaphors are abundantly present in his work. He writes, for example, about the technologies of power and of the Self. He is fascinated by the notion of an apparatus that transforms human beings into mechanical extensions, and so forth. Society, in Foucault's view, is a fabric: a battery of complicated and interacting machines. But more important even is the fact that both Dewey and Foucault vehemently reject all forms of foundationalism. According to Foucault, philosophy no longer is a *prima philosophia*, i.e. a privileged form of discourse that derives its claims and insights from certain incontestable basic principles in a syllogistic and deductive manner. Rather, philosophy is, like medicine, a diagnostic practice. It uses certain tools to come to terms with certain situations - preferably situations of crisis. Even humanism, the most "enlightened"

appeal to fundamental principles in modern philosophy, has to be rejected unequivocally, according to Foucault.

There are, however, a number of differences as well. The most striking one, perhaps, is the fact that Foucault never sees a philosophical tool as something that allows us to find a solution to a problem. Rather, it is the philosopher's task to analyze the basic conditions that allow certain problematic situations (as well as their "solutions") to emerge. A concrete problem is always part of a large-scale pattern and the philosophical gaze tries to identify this pattern, tries to discern the typical within the concrete. Take Foucault's notion of biopower, for example. During the industrial revolution, he tells us, public authorities became interested in the well-being of the population at large and began to develop an awareness of items like food, health, hygiene and housing. They recognized that the wealth of a nation depends to a large extent on the well-being of its population, notably its labor force, and that a nation's economic and military strength depends to a large extent on the physical vigor of its human resources. According to Foucault, a whole series of social "problems" and "social solutions" that emerged during this period may be analyzed by making use of this conceptual tool: "biopower".

In order to analyze the present, however, a new philosophical vocabulary had to be invented. Tools like "biopolitics" and "technologies of power" had to be replaced by a different set of concepts, containing notions like "practices of freedom" and "technologies of the self". Rather than being the more or less passive target of policy measures and governmental campaigns, the individual himself may, under certain circumstances, become interested in issues like food, health and lifestyle. The problems and solutions that present themselves under such circumstances have to be *read* from a different perspective. I use the word "read" on purpose, because rather than focusing on the "real life" situations themselves, Foucault tends to pay attention to the way they are defined and described, notably by experts. According to Foucault, the things and situations we encounter cannot be isolated from the words and concepts we use in describing them.

Let me try to clarify this issue a bit further by commenting on one of the cases Larry Hickman presents in his paper. One of the "hard questions" he inserts in his text is about a thirteen-year-old boy who is taken to a physician by his parents for genetic screening. Unfortunately, the test reveals evidence for the early onset of Alzheimer's. What is the *solution* to this *problem*, he then asks. What should be *done*? Well, those are not the kind of questions Foucault would ask. While reading Hickman's description of this problematic situation, I once again had the experience I quite often have while reading specimens of this bioethical subgenre called "case study". Quite often, these cases resemble in a striking manner the kind of problem situations that are staged and played out in the most popular genre of our era, the *soap*. I do not say this in order to deny the seriousness of this and similar situations, but I want to point out that we are confronted with a *certain way of* describing and experiencing these problems. A professional ethicist might rephrase the case a bit more formally: Is it morally acceptable to subject the individual in question to a genetic test for a disease for which there is no treatment? Or, to put it more generally, are we allowed to do whatever happens to be technically possible? Rather

than formulating an answer to this question, a Foucault-like analysis would focus on the standard formula in which contemporary health-care problems are experienced and described. To begin with, the name of a scientific author (Alzheimer) is used to indicate a certain kind of disease. This technique to identify physical conditions is known as "eponymy" - one of the basic functions of modern scientific (in this case: biomedical) authorship. Furthermore, we as individuals (more or less voluntarily) enter situations in which we subject our children and ourselves to procedures of *screening* in order to discuss the results of these procedures in terms of *prevention* and *treatment*, *information* and *option*. These standard formulas are to be regarded as techniques of control used by experts in order to deal with concrete problems. What kind of decision should we make and what would the societal impact of such a decision be in the public sphere (in terms of demographical statistics and explorations)? Rather than being philosophical tools themselves, these formulas and procedures should be the *object* of a philosophical analysis. The goal of such an analysis would not be to find a solution to the problem at hand (in terms of the standard formula), or to make the right "decision", but rather to analyze the social and epistemological conditions that allow these kinds of situations, these kinds of questions and comments, these kinds of problems and solutions, to emerge. The question Foucault would try to answer is not what we should *do*, but rather *who* we - as subjects of a situation - are.

In other words, Foucault's philosophy may be regarded as "French pragmatism" in the sense that it refrains from justifying itself by appealing to "foundations". But there are important differences as well. Rather than looking for tools that may help us to find solutions to certain problems, Foucault's philosophy tends to focus on the way we, under certain conditions, experience and articulate our "problems" as well as our "solutions". His tools allow us to come up with a diagnosis, rather than a solution. They are, in other words, closer to "screening" than to "treatment". And this is the kind of pragmatism I would refer to as *philosophical* rather than technical.

Unlike philosophers who, *as philosophers*, can perhaps afford to reflect on chronic or acute problem situations from such a distance, most individuals will ask themselves how precisely they ought to handle the problems with which they are confronted. What should we, as moral agents or subjects, *do* in a certain situation? How are we to act? To put it differently: is a philosophy that restricts itself to a more or less "diagnostic" form of reflection and refuses to be of real assistance to troubled subjects, is such a philosophy of any relevance when dealing with contemporary issues - rather than with, for example, investigations into the history of ethics, medicine, or science? This is indeed a difficult question. In Foucault's case, it is never easy to understand precisely how his philosophical studies are linked to the choices and statements he made regarding the present, in interviews and other more informal genres, often of a radical nature. Yet, a connection can be discerned. By studying the conditions that allow certain problems and solutions, as well as certain principles and concepts to emerge, we may become more aware of the factors that actually guide our thoughts and actions in the present. And this may prepare us for making our own concrete choices with regard to the present (for example concerning

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