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Pragmatic Ethics and the Contemporary African Value System

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Abstract

Every idea has practical consequences in terms of how it is interpreted and applied to society. William James' pragmatic philosophy is a double-edged sword: while it is an epistemological theory focusing on science and the scientific method, it also has implications for moral thought. In this respect, pragmatism becomes a social theory capable of being interpreted in different ways. Epistemology and ethics have divergent interests: one is the justification of knowledge claims, and the other is the justification of moral belief, claims and conduct. Although both converge at the point of justification, what is acceptable standard in epistemology does not readily sift through the net of ethics unscathed. Pragmatic ethics enjoins the pursuit of *only* those ideals that are potentially capable of making a positive difference to human wellbeing; however, negative interpretation of pragmatist reasoning is the suggestion that a moral agent take that option that enables them to attain their goal or purpose in a moral situation. But this temporary apparent solution only succeeds in putting away the inevitable misery for another day. Positive pragmatism involves using the experience and mistakes of the past to envisage and build a future that enables social development and progress in the science and technological development found in the Western world. Unfortunately, many African societies have made little progress in social development due to the negative aspect of pragmatism that has been deeply imbibed in them. This paper is a critical reflection on the philosophy of pragmatism, from the perspective of the contemporary African value system, using data sourced from library and archival materials.

Key Words: Africa, epistemology, ethics, pragmatism, value system

Introduction

When scholars of the classical pragmatic persuasion began to put out the theoretical framework of their philosophy, something both noble and grave was, at the same time, happening to humanity in terms of morals. Pragmatism was not a new phenomenon; its inauguration as a philosophy only furnished the intellectual foundation for a way of life, attitude and disposition that already existed

in the human mind from the dawn of time. James (1907) describes pragmatism as “a new name for some old ways of thinking” (p.i). Accordingly, he argues:

We store ... extra truths away in our memories, and with the overflow we fill our books of reference. Wherever such an extra truth becomes practically relevant to one of our emergencies, it passes from cold-storage to do work in the world and our belief in it grows active. You can say of it then either that *it is useful because it is true* or that *it is true because it is useful*. Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing.... True ideas would never have ... acquired a class-name, least of all a name suggesting value, unless they had been useful from the outset in this way (pp.78-79).

Ideas have consequences; they are subject to interpretation, even a plethora or a cacophony of interpretations and misrepresentations. James is concerned with epistemological question in this passage. Regardless of how logically sacrosanct his argument may be in epistemology, however, one of the ethical implications of the above claim is that truth is determined by functionality or usefulness; that is, truth is a function of what works, whatever enables a person to achieve his aim in a given moral situation—what James calls “truth’s cash-value” (p.77).

It is a well-established fact that sub-Saharan Africans take their community life seriously (Aja, 1998; Ejizu, n.d.; Ntubagirirwa, 2001; Ikenobe, 2006). Yet these traditional values have been continually endangered by the incursion of Western influences, ranging from colonialism to neo-colonialism and globalization (Oladipo, 2009), including the unwholesome ways in which Africans have adopted pragmatic thought in their daily living and social engagements. The purpose of this research is to reflect on this phenomenon, and to sketch out the tacit role it plays in clogging the wheel of social progress and development in Africa, thereby rendering doubtful the realization of the much longed-for African identity.

Logical and ethical implications of pragmatic sociology

Akin to Wiredu’s (1980, p.66) notion of truth as subjective “opinion,” pragmatism claims that truth depends on what the moral agent makes of a situation. For truth is not intrinsic, but extrinsic to ideas. In other words, ideas are not necessarily true in themselves. “Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events” (James, 1907, pp.77-78; original emphasis); something external to ideas makes them true. As such, there are no *a priori* truths. A moral agent could not know for certain whether killing the innocent is immoral; to proceed, the moral agent must first verify the intention behind the action and its eventual perpetration. Truth changes to the extent that the immediate personal needs of the individual or group are satisfied. Thus, if an option works out as expected, it qualifies as a good, right, true or worthy course of action. According to Aghamelu, Onwuliri and Ogbolu, (2021):

The pragmatists address the issue of certainty by systematically bridging theories and experience. Truth is merely determined by the problem solving ability of theories or any other form of knowledge. Theories are merely tools that become true [by] successfully solving a particular problematic situation (p.48).

However, to what extent is it always morally justified to adopt a course of action, any action at all,

simply because it succeeds in enabling one achieve or accomplish one's purpose? Put directly, does an idea's working automatically make it true, or justified? Does usefulness really make an action morally justified? If the means is ultimately justified by the end, then there is absolute reason to suspect that pragmatic sociology constitutes a clear and present danger to a lot we hold dear in the domain of human social existence.

Pragmatic tendencies in African thought

Pragmatic philosophy draws attention to whatever *works*, whatever is useful and expedient; that is, that option which makes "a practical difference" in the realization of goals. Pragmatic ethics would rather that, in decision-making process, people adopted the option that produces the result they desire. This section focuses on identifying the areas in which the contemporary African society, like any other human society, tends to follow the principles of pragmatic ethics as the philosophy of life. This is not to suggest that African thought has necessarily been influenced—directly or indirectly—by the Western pragmatic tradition of philosophy. The aim is to identify the traits of pragmatism in contemporary African thought and social existence, to illustrate that pragmatism is natural to the human person, and to highlight its discontinuities with moral logic.

One way in which the African mindset unwittingly subscribes to pragmatism is in the conception of personhood. Although there is definitely a different school in African thought that believes in the ontological nature of personhood, some individual scholars maintain that, in Africa worldview, personhood is not conceived as being intrinsic to the individual; rather, it is achieved or acquired (for example, Menkiti, 1984). Western philosophical worldviews typically abstract the intrinsic features of the human being, such as rational soul, will or memory, and proceed to make them the defining or essential characteristics of *person*. In Personalism, for instance, personhood is defined by nature of the person as a person (McCabe, 2001). For this reason, the value of the person is not necessarily measured by an individual's contribution to society, or one's talents and achievements, but in the ontological significance of their being. Each person is a unique expression of human nature. This is the intellectual background on which the human person ought to be affirmed for his or her own sake and treated "in love as sacred and to be revered, and nothing else" (MacMurray, 1935, p.xv). African scholars are divided in their opinions on the pragmatic communitarian theory of personhood. The radical thesis comes from Mbiti (1970), Menkiti (1984) and Ikuenobe (2006), who hold that the community is basic to the formation of personhood in African thought system. Others, such as Gyekye (1997), Wiredu (1991) and Maqoma (2020), uphold a moderate thesis, according to which, besides community, there are other factors that confer personhood in African thought, such as rationality and biological attributes which human beings possess and are capable of exercising as individuals. However, this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. At least, both parties do agree that the community does exercise some influence on the individual African; and suffice it to note that the African view of personhood is pragmatic in character, because it involves some tacit assumption that the individual owes his or her life, as well as certain duties and obligations to the community (Aja, 1998). As such, the status of personhood is a conferment on an individual to the extent that these obligations and allegiance to the community are upheld by the individual.

A person acquires the status of personhood in contemporary African thought by solving the problems in his or her community, such as food, education, electricity, water, communication, transportation, and the like. Solving these problems requires having the financial wherewithal, or human resources. Anyone who achieves nothing for the community, regardless of their political,

educational or financial status, does not receive much by way of recognition. An individual can be a billionaire without being regarded as having attained personhood. To this end, personhood is something at which a person could fail, as Menkiti (1984) puts it:

The African view reaches ... for what might be described as a maximal definition of the person. As far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. Hence, the African emphasizes ... the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term (p.159).

The more the individual accomplishes for the community, the more elevated he or she becomes in personality and status. This recognition is expressed through the conferment of chieftaincy titles that say something about that particular aspect of the community's life that has been enhanced. Some of these titles, in Igboland, for instance, include *Ọnwá na-étírí ọhà* ("philanthropist" or "torchbearer"; literally: "The moon that illuminates the people's lives"); *Ọchírí ọzuọ* or *Ọsụ ọfia* ("man/woman of substance"); *Ogbu agu* ("Savior"; "warrior"); or *Ogbu ehi* ("person of means"); and the like. Each appellation is an expression and recognition of the aspect of community life affected by the philanthropist. So long as the wealth trickles down to the influential, titled people in the community, and the community benefits therefrom, no questions are raised about the source of the riches; whether they have been acquired by fair or foul means. In many cases, after a few years, providence exposes the dubious source of the wealth (*True Crime Daniel*, 8 November 2021); but, literally, no lessons are learned. In fact, the entire cycle is repeated in the next generation of *les nouveaux-riches*.

To this end, there is a popular saying with regard to the African situation to the effect that children are only to be seen but not to be heard. Again, this is simply because of the foregoing observations that in the African thought system, personhood is only attainable through achievements. Since the African view of the human being is rather "*processual*," as Menkiti (1984, p.159) puts it, "the fact that persons become persons only after a process of incorporation and initiation"—"a long process of social and ritual transformation" through life, until they "attain the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man," then it would seem to follow that a child is not seen as possessing intrinsically that status of full personhood.

That full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life, but is attained after one is well along in society, indicates straight away that the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes... What we have here then is both a claim that a qualitative difference exists between old and young, and a claim that some sort of ontological progression exists between infancy and ripening old age. One does not just take on additional features, one also undergoes fundamental changes at the very core of one's being (Menkiti, p.159).

Of what pragmatic importance is a child to his community in terms of alleviating the problems therein? More precisely, how financially capable would a child prove, and as a result of which he

or she can contribute meaningfully in this direction? On the contrary, adulthood is viewed as a valid sign of wisdom believed to come through several years of experience because it is the time most people have naturally made exploits in life (Oguejiofor, 2002, pp.145-146).

Another area in which African thought tends to blend with pragmatic ethics is in the area of morality. To a very large extent, though, morality in African thought is religiously motivated. Idowu (1962), for instance, addresses the Yoruba moral philosophy as a case study:

With the Yoruba, morality is certainly a fruit of religion. They do not make any attempt to separate the two, and it is impossible for them to do so without disastrous consequences. What have been named tabu [sic] took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were things which were morally approved or disapproved by the Deity (p.146).

While Idowu's diagnosis of this issue is altogether factual to some extent, it cannot be the whole story. Otherwise, one would, thereby, imply that aside from religion, Africans would have no sense of moral right and wrong. Thus, besides the religious factor, morality in African society also springs up from the practical circumstances in which Africans find themselves. Thus, while granting that certain norms of behaviour can be connected with how the religious life of the people is fashioned, Oladipo (1987) submits that:

There are certainly other moral values that arise out of the attempt by the people to grapple with the various dimensions of human existence... Morality, because it is inextricably linked to human action, covers a wider range of human activities and experiences than religion (p.49).

From this perspective, Africans tend to be pragmatic by approaching morality from the point of view of the betterment of the human condition; this pragmatic dimension shows, as Oluwole (cited in Oladipo 1987, p.49) claims, that they primarily "give due cognizance to human interests in moral matters." However, it must be noted that our aim here is not to denigrate the contemporary African moral value system. Rather, the aim is to show, more positively, that Africans do not follow moral principles blindly. They do not see morality as a god that deserves worship or allegiance of any kind for its own sake. In this worldview, morality becomes exactly what it really is: a means, rather than an end in itself. The dynamic character of this value system is reflected in this pragmatic character. Neither does pointing out this fact necessarily negate the fact that contemporary African societies are not immune to the onslaught of moral decadence, which has become widespread across the globe.

In the realm of politics and governance, the political party with mouth-watering gifts during the period of political campaign, gifts that can be collected and appropriated for the moment, with a little branding in which people are told what makes them feel good at the moment, is all that is needed for the majority of the people to get swayed by the antics of the political class across Africa. In more recent times, the political party that is able to do this gets elected. What is crucial is that promises be made; whether or not the promises are realistic is immaterial. Even when in office, African politicians basically read prepared speeches and reiterate their "commitment" to nation-building; and the people get reassured once again that all is well and moving in the right direction. This happens even in the face of brazen incompetency at leadership and evidently ill-conceived

policy direction. As Mattravers (2004) argues, this trend has become a world-wide phenomenon, as people no longer care about fundamental morality, but about short-lived selfish interests and other personal advantages that accrue to them if a particular political party comes to power. In Nigeria, politicians practically dump a political party once it is no longer in power and viable enough for the realization of selfish ambitions. They ‘cross-carpet’ to whatever party that comes to power, which will be waiting with open arms since democracy is a game of numbers. This enables the politician to ‘secure’ his political future and interest, even at the expense of the common good and public interest. Also, most media houses readily pitch their tent accordingly, depending on the political party in power.

In some contemporary African societies, such as the Igbo of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana, the concept of truth is inextricably woven with that of truthfulness (Wiredu, 1998). That is, the cognitive sense of truth is inadvertently taken for granted and obliterated by the concept of truthfulness in usage, even when one means to refer to the former. To say something that is not in tandem with the objective state of affairs is almost automatically understood to make a person a *liar*. This moral undertone raises the problem of how to distinguish between logical and moral senses of falsehood. The cogent distinction between the two senses of truth—the cognitive and moral—has either been rendered redundant, or is altogether nonexistent. Thus, it becomes a contradiction for a person to make an honest mistake by asserting what is not the case and to be a truthful person at the same time. Wiredu (1998) notes that:

It is intelligible, though extremely implausible, to suggest that truth in the cognitive sense is constituted by communal agreement, but it is not intelligible at all to make the same suggestion about truthfulness. Truthfulness has to do with the relation between what a person thinks and what he says. To be truthful is to let your speech reflect your thoughts... It then becomes possible to see truthfulness as saying unto others what one would say unto oneself (p.176-177).

Morality is tied to human intention with regard to action and conduct. Moral considerations, says Oladipo (1987, p.49), “arise out of the attempt by the people to grapple with the various dimensions of human existence.” It is because of their pragmatic view of this notion of truth, therefore, that Africans have rather opted for this moralistic interpretation.

However, there exists also truth in the cognitive sense, as Wiredu points out in the above quotation, in which there is or ought to be no moral attachments since the individual concerned is simply stating facts as they present themselves to him or her. He gives his own *candid* opinion to a given issue based on what he honestly believes, although that belief may be wrong. Under such circumstances, as Wiredu (1998, p.176) puts it, “what others think or say has no particular role to play”. Accordingly, falsehood, as these Africans would see it, does not ordinarily constitute in error or mistaken judgment but in a lie. That is why the tendency is always there to accuse others of telling lies when in essence what should be said is simply that what a person is saying is not the case, is mistaken or is incorrect. But this may be excused on the ground that sometimes, as in casual disputes, it is difficult to determine whether a falsehood is deliberate or simply an erroneous judgment, especially if there is no direct evidence. However, our aim is simply to highlight the pragmatic import of this way of conceiving the notion of truth in African thought. This moral

conception implies a view of truth as a way of *doing* something; and not merely as a theoretically correct or incorrect postulation.

Widespread even in contemporary African society is the attitude or belief, as Oladipo (1992, p.36) describes it, “that God has decided everything that will happen, and that [therefore] no human effort can change things.” This is known as *predestination*; the notion that every person has his or her life history laid out beforehand such that nothing can be added to it by the person’s actions and inactions (Procter, 1978, p.857); that life is merely the fulfilment of a destiny; or that nothing is done out of free will, but in fulfillment of a pre-ordained history. This is an essential element of African belief in the existence of a Supreme Being (variously interpreted), who not only created the universe, but also “ordains the destiny of his creatures, especially that of men” (Mbiti, 1969, p.40). Destiny is believed to be a gift received from the Supreme Being (*Olodumare, Chukwu, Osanobua*, etc.). It is compared to a seal placed on each person and which determines the individual’s personality, exploits and achievements in life. This is so far as the belief goes in principle. In practice, Africans profoundly believe that destiny can be altered in some clever ways, by doing something — positive or negative — to effect the desired change. When there is a misfortune, it is attributed to enemies or witches having gained an upper hand in the individual’s life. While it is sometimes blamed on a bad destiny, it is equally believed that the individual or group of persons concerned is wont to do something about that situation, in an attempt to change or alter the very destiny which is believed to be, in principle, unalterable.

What this demonstrates is the pragmatic tendency of Africans in adapting to differing or changing circumstances of life. Again, when good luck or fortune smiles on them, they attribute it to hard work and determination in which an ill fortune is believed to have been converted to a good one (Oladipo, 1992, p.44). Even when it is attributed to destiny or God, it is not viewed as a contradiction, so long as things have worked out as desired. These considerations may seem contradictory; but our focus is on pointing out the pragmatic character of Africans when it comes to interpreting their life experiences. Oladipo (1992) clarifies the issue as follows:

[This] conception of destiny is no more than a pragmatic construct or device for explaining unknown or hidden factors of human experience, ... it would seem to be a mere extension of natural causes. And since, on the natural plane, the overwhelming belief seems to be that every person has the capacity to determine the course of his life, at least by being able to decide what to do or what not to do at any point in time, we can see that belief in predestination is not incompatible with belief in free will and moral responsibility (p.45).

From this analysis, then, one finds that it is normal for the contemporary African mindset to interpret their life successes and fortunes pragmatically, while attributing to destiny and God those things for which they cannot find natural explanations, although God and destiny can as well come into the picture when things *work out* as desired.

Contemporary search for new values, identity and security also demonstrates how pragmatic Africans are even in matters pertaining to religion, which has been a useful means not only for maintaining personal relationship with the Deity, but even more fundamentally, a tool for achieving one’s personal interests and desires. The allegiance or loyalty a person gives to a

religious sect is determined by the extent to which interests are served and needs are met. Mbiti (1969, pp.263-264.) delineates three stages of this pragmatic exploration. First, there is *conversion*, “the most overt and dynamic religious event or process”, by which the African presumably turns away from the traditional religion of his or her ancestors to embrace Christianity, Islam, or other foreign minority religions, such as Judaism or Baha’ism. This then could be followed by a process of *re-conversion* which normally occurs within the same religion. At this stage, most Africans scramble to find a religion that fits them, and into which they can fit better; for example, moving from one Christian denomination to another. This pragmatic attitude is mostly seen in two phenomena Mbiti refers to as *apostasy* or *backsliding* and “religious concubinage”. For Mbiti (1969), apostasy occurs among African Christians and Muslims:

When crises of life or other demands come upon the individual. It is mainly an individual, rather than community, movement from Christianity and Islam to traditional religions and secularism... Those who withdraw in this manner are pointing to the fact that they have found neither a meaningful identity nor sufficient security in Christianity or Islam (p.264).

Concubinage takes place when the African’s search for a more meaningful livelihood culminates in the combined adoption of two or more of Christianity, Islam and traditional religion under the pretext that all religions are, after all, the same. Such religiosity lacks depth and substance; but since there is apparently some sense or feeling of social security, it can really only provide an escape hatch for the individual incapable of meeting the demands of the religions involved in this concubinage. The uncontrollable rate of proliferation one sees in today’s Africa—in Islam and, particularly Christianity—suggests that those involved are after a *workable* option that can assuage their personal aspirations and longings. Religion is changed at will in the same way as people change their old garments for new ones. No sooner than a new movement that promises better satisfaction and fulfillment springs up than it begins to gain adherents in thousands. People keep coming and going, in the quest for a viable option that promises to provide solutions to all the problems of practical life. No doubt, the pragmatic stance of contemporary Africans even with regard to religion is partly responsible for all the trafficking. Again, it must be maintained that religious pluralism is not peculiar to the African society, as the primary interest here is not to criticize the apparent contradictions found in this survey, but to point out the pragmatic tendency of the human person (in this case, Africans) to religion. Rather the intention at this point is to take a critical look at the ways in which African society has adopted pragmatic standards in its own value system and the consequences of this adoption. One consequence of the shift in values is that the African is no longer defined by what he is but by what he has acquired materially. The sociological question, therefore, is how the moral crisis caused by this shift can be dealt with. The moral decadence we live in today apparently comes from the fact that Africans have moved away from their value system through the adoption of short-term pragmatism.

Pragmatic ethics in the context of human wellbeing

Traditional African value system is based on communal authority handed down from preceding generations to the present, with the emphatic understanding that these values be kept sacrosanct, pure or untainted (Gyekye, 1997). Each member of the community is responsible for safe-guarding these values. In fact, the African’s validity or authenticity is realised when he acts or speaks in accordance with what “our ancestors said” (Achebe, 1965, pp.121, 143). But pragmatism puts Occam’s razor on all notions of dogmatism, traditionalism and authority. In the African value

system, truth is authoritative in character because to speak the truth is tantamount to speaking the mind of other right-thinking persons in the community and thus, being of one voice or “one mouth” (Wiredu, 1998, p.176). Although this coherentist view of truth suffers the same fate as all others of the same bent—which is not really the issue here—it is radically different from the pragmatic conception of truth in which truth is downright relative, depending on the individual’s interests, goals and aspirations. If truth is dependent on such relativistic terms as the pragmatist proposes, then it is clearly individualistic in outlook. But in the traditional African value system, individual interest is subsumed and realized, to a considerable extent, in the general or common good of the community.

Perhaps one of the most serious ethical problems with pragmatism is that it would not recognize such virtues as perseverance, long-suffering, fortitude and patience, since it enjoins the adoption of that process which yields the desired result here and now. However, real life is not a bed of roses wherein what we want, wish or desire is readily available for being chosen and acted upon. Pragmatism does have merit, value and prestige in its insistence on practical knowledge. But to say this is merely to state the obvious: every course or cause deserves a purpose. Nature is so constituted as to seek definiteness and finality (Schwarz, 1956, p.218). Thus, it is necessary to be able to think clearly, even taking as much time as necessary, if one were to be able to make a reasonably good choice and to act well (Mann, 1967, Aghamelu, et al, 2021). This is especially true with regard to moral matters. In thus emphasizing action, the practical and the changing character of truth and knowledge, pragmatism tacitly assumes that it is easy to decipher what course of action or approach to adopt in all conceivable moral situations. This raises the basic question, why then do we need to strive for knowledge and enlightenment in the first place if the problems of life came to us fully labeled and already demystified, with their solutions already attached for easy choice, as pragmatism seems to imply? Why do we face moral dilemma every other day? In fact, why does the issue or problem of morality arise in the first place, if not due to the fact that reason is needed for the critical assessment of moral situations, before it would be possible to arrive at a rational choice of action? Without discernment, could we always know what is best for us simply by instinct? In this way, therefore, pragmatism is hopelessly limited in its horizons.

Pragmatism is averse to philosophical speculation, and opposes the notion of knowledge for its own sake, except knowledge that has some usefulness and pragmatic import. However, the philosopher cannot entirely avoid speculative enjoyment of the true, even if merely to serve the society of his times; and knowledge for its own sake eventually overflows into the most important kinds of action. Science is, by definition, knowledge; and we cannot accomplish things in the pragmatically useful sense without first knowing how to accomplish them. Thus, in disregarding the crucial distinction between the element of validity or truth itself and the actual procedure by means of which this validity is established and truth recognized, the pragmatists ended up confusing truth and knowledge of it. This is more seriously felt when we realize that if the method of establishing truth is solely empirical as pragmatism portends, then it implies the exclusion of all *a priori* or essential knowledge of the non-analytic or synthetic type (Schoobrood, 1970, p.73). If we took pragmatism seriously, there would be no transcendental principles with which to derive knowledge beyond experience. The resultant relativism offers no absolute moral norms on the basis of which to establish the validity of the truth or otherwise of a given state of affairs; all we can go by is stark individual preferences, feeling or beliefs. Pragmatism is one of the forms which postmodernism, in its characteristic radicalism, has assumed as it attempts to dismantle the

unrelenting foundationalist mechanism of foregoing Western philosophy. The ethical affinities of pragmatism spring from the perception that all knowing is referred to a purpose. This at once renders it useful as a means to an end or a good. Completely useless knowledge becomes impossible, though the uses of knowledge may still vary greatly in character, in directness, and in the extent and force of the appeal to different minds.

Conclusion

In the middle of the twentieth century, the psychologist, Oswald Schwarz (1956) noted with concern that contemporary society has evolved a highly commercialized mentality, wherein selfish ambition and accumulation of material wealth are conceived as the most important value of human existence. In this outlook, human worth and success are a function of how much material wealth an individual has amassed, regardless of the outcome. Schwarz regrets that the ultimate social and ethical implication of this pragmatic attitude is that we no longer live our lives as ends in themselves, but as a means to an end. In the desperate scramble to meet conventional expectations, humanity has lost the innocence of plain living. This paper is a critical appraisal of the pragmatic ethics as it obtains in the contemporary African value system. Against the backdrop of William James's pragmatic philosophy, we have contended that in spite of its short run advantages, pragmatism, as a philosophical basis for determining and assessing values, falls below expectation as an aid to the restoration of the eroded traditional African value system. In particular, the contemporary African social value system needs to be restored on the basis of the communal ethical system that pre-existed the colonial invasion of African societies.

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