

**UNDERSTANDING OF PRAGMATISM AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE: A
CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY KUALA LUMPUR STUDENTS
PEMAHAMAN FALSAFAH PRAGMATISME DAN ISLAMIK PERSPEKTIF:
SATU KAJIAN KE ATAS PELAJAR UNIVERSITI KUALA LUMPUR**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ideology of pragmatism. The research was conducted at one of the UniKL branch institutes, the British Malaysian Institute in Gombak. The British Malaysian Institute majorly offers engineering courses with expertise in electrical, electronics and medical electronic engineering. This study aims at analysing the UniKL students' understanding of pragmatism ideology and how their understanding shapes their thinking and action. This article highlighted some features of pragmatism by referring to the one of the famous pioneers of pragmatism, Williams James. A set of questionnaire was instrumented for collecting data from the respondents on their thought regarding the ideology of pragmatism. This ideology has changed the lifestyle of people especially for Muslim. This is because people believe that this ideology is more practical in solving problems consequently some of this ideology is not suitable for Muslim. The result of this study revealed that respondents did not have much understanding about this ideology due to lack of Islamic principal. Therefore, it is suggested that learning institutions need to instil better understanding of pragmatism ideology among students and responsible for educators to educate students properly in order to protect their faith especially among the Muslim students.

Keywords

Pragmatism; Features of pragmatism; Islamic perspective; faith; Muslim Understanding

Abstrak

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengenalpasti kefahaman pelajar terhadap satu ideologi pragmatisme dan ciri-cirinya dalam kalangan para pelajar yang berlatar belakangkan bidang kejuruteraan di Universiti Kuala Lumpur (British Malaysian Institute), Gombak. Kajian ini membincangkan kefahaman dan tindakan pelajar terhadap ideologi pragmatisme ini yang diperkenalkan oleh pengasasnya iaitu Williams James. Soalan kaji selidik diedarkan kepada sejumlah responden dalam usaha memperolehi data kajian. Ideologi ini juga sedikit sebanyak mempengaruhi kehidupan seseorang muslim yang mempercayai ia dapat menyelesaikan sesuatu masalah yang berkaitan malah ia sebenarnya tidak bersesuaian kepada umat Islam. Hasil kajian mendapati bahawa responden menyedari akan ideologi ini. Walaubagaimanapun, kajian juga menekankan bahawa guru-guru perlu meletakkan keutamaan dalam perkara tersebut dan memastikan para pelajar memahami ideologi tersebut supaya mereka dapat memelihara kepercayaan atau keimanan sebagai seorang Islam.

Kata kunci

Pragmatisme, Ciri- ciri pragmatisme, Perspektif Islam, Kepercayaan, Pemahaman Muslim

1.0 Introduction

People refer pragmatism as the philosophy of action. The establishment and introduction of the pragmatism ideology is attributed to the three eminent scholars, namely Charles Pierce, William James and John Dewey. Although Charles Pierce was cited as the first philosopher to introduce this philosophy, but his name was not as well-known as James. William James is the most well-known pragmatist philosopher, and he is credited for popularising this ideology of pragmatism. As for John Dewey, he was known for combining the pragmatism philosophy of Pierce and James. Each of these scholars has their own approach to pragmatism.

The term pragmatism is derived from the Greek word $\pi\rho\alpha\gamma\mu\alpha\tau\iota\sigma\mu\alpha$. Erkki Kilpinen (2008), which means action, practise, or application. This definition was introduced by Charles in 1912. According to Hans Joas (1999), pragmatism asserts that action is not something contingent, but rather the way in which human beings exist in the world, as a happy phrase goes. This means that people can do whatever they want as long as provides benefits. Then, according to a dictionary of philosophical terms and names, pragmatism is a theory advocating that the truth originates from an idea or belief in action that has a practical effect.

Historically, pragmatism was founded in 1860 by a group of thinkers with backgrounds in science, mathematics, philosophy, and psychology. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, they were known as "The Metaphysical Club" which featured Pierce, James, Oliver W. Holmes, Frank Abott, and Chauncey Wright.

James was a more well-known pragmatist philosopher than Pierce and John Dewy, despite the fact that Pierce was the first to introduce this ideology. As mentioned above, these three key scholars have their own unique way and approach in describing the concept of pragmatism. James' perspective on pragmatism was more psychological and religious, whereas John Dewey approached pragmatism from the ethics and social point of views. Pierce on the other hand preferred logical and scientific approach to pragmatism. Kamal Azmi et al.(2016). Even though the three of them described this ideology in different ways, they were all in agreement on the idea of rejecting intellectualism and absolutism.

As mentioned above, James was person who popularized this concept as many of the literature on the concept and ideology of pragmatism were produced by James. James famously presented his pragmatic theory of meaning by asking, "What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?" James' pragmatic method of clarifying the meaning of concepts was to simply trace their respective "practical consequences." Henrik Rydenfelt (2008).

Russell believed that in order to comprehend this ideology, people will refer to James' concept of pragmatism. This is due to the fact that James was among the early scholar in the United States of America, as well as the pioneer of pragmatism and instrumentalism ideology. He also introduced the concept of radical empiricism. Russel Betrand (1947).

2.0 Problem Statements

2.1 Features of Pragmatism by William James

First and foremost, James' concept of pragmatism features two main elements, namely science and religion. James emphasised both elements of science and religion in conceptualising the ideology of pragmatism due to the presence of those elements in his surrounding community. His writings entitled "The Will to Believe" and "The Varieties of Religious Experience", provide evidence on the importance of the religious element. Christopher Hookway (2011). Aside from that, there are significant differences between James and as Dewey. One of them is that Dewey only emphasized on science rather than religion.

James asserted that pragmatism can provide real approaches to any ideas, whether physical or spiritual, with corresponding practical implications. This concept was first introduced by Charles. The idea was then extended by William, who believed that the truth can be proven through practical application rather than philosophical or theoretical approach. From this viewpoint, theory is merely a tool and cannot provide an answer to an undefined question. According to James, truth is defined by a person's agreement or disagreement with the reality happening. In general, both pragmatists and intellectualists accept this concept of truth. The argument lies in the exact definition of the term 'agreement' and 'reality' when reality is taken as something with which our ideas must agree.

According to James, religion can be measured using scientific methods, or known as hypotheses in science, in the effort to achieve truth. H. Standish. Thayer (1940). He also saw religion as an instrument because belief is measured by action, and he who forbids people from believing religion to be true necessarily forbids them from acting as they should if they did believe it to be true. The entire defence of religious faith is dependent on action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis differs in no way from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a mere superfluity that should be pruned away, and debate about its validity should be avoided.

2.2 Pragmatism from Islamic Perspective

The pragmatism philosophy in general contradicts to Islam. According to Mohd Farid Mohd Shahrar. Pragmatism rejects the metaphysical method and is also opposed to Islamic epistemology, or the theory of knowledge in Islam, which is based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Islam does not solely depend on scientific knowledge but dictates the combination of science and religion as well as metaphysic in achieving the truth. Depending on science as the ultimate guide to knowledge and discarding the religion, in this context, Islam can encourage human to eliminate the presence of Human-God relationship. Kamal Azmi et al. (2016a,b).

Most Islamic scholars, Jeffrey Guhin (2020) opined that pragmatism does not recognise absolute or single truth, as asserted by James when explaining the concept of pragmatism. Pragmatists only accept the truth after it has been demonstrated by experience, and they believe that the world can be managed by human themselves. Pragmatism is based on the ability of reason to achieve what is required.

The openness characteristic of pragmatism has given rise to the concept of pluralism, as James' writings promote pluralistic religious ideas and reject the truth as belonging only to one religion and its adherents. Truth and reality are historical and relational products, according to religious pluralism. This is in direct opposition to Islamic teachings, which hold that Islam is the only authentic religion, despite the fact that the same time it urges its followers not to deny the rights of other religions in social life. Khalif Muammar (2015).

The ideas of pragmatism are situated between personal needs and desires. This is because, in order to obtain material needs and benefits, humans have lost sight of their role as a member of society and social service. Apart from that, pragmatism is the same as utilitarianism and hedonism, whereby these ideologies emphasize the value of practical and practical value while ignoring material profits. Kamal Azmi et al. (2016a,b).

As a result of pragmatism, the structure of society will become more individualistic. The pragmatic society will eventually suffer from humanism, whereby they only think for their own benefit. Thus, today's moral decline is also due to modern society's failure to understand and interpret morality or ethics. Then, materialism and pragmatism, which inspired the construction of Western civilization, will be unable to lay the groundwork for humanitarianism, which can strengthen community development. Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1999).

The values presented by pragmatism are centred on humans or are human-centric, whereas the values presented by Islam are centred on revelation and are God-centric. Osman Bakar (1989). In this case, Islam recognises the intellect and sensory ability as divine gifts to man while explaining the limitations of both faculties in obtaining absolute truth. Furthermore, scientists who succeed in gathering rich information about creatures but fail to see their relationship with the Creator's knowledge, wisdom, and power are scientists who have lost the nature of justice and are not considered as true scientists. Another point of view is that in Islam, truth is inextricably linked to religion and even stands on its own.

In Islam, the truth is inextricably linked to religion and even serves as its foundation. It is derived from the revelation of the Quran and Hadith. The Islamic truth is founded on four principles: al-ilzām, which means perfect and determined by Allah and His Apostle, al-yusrā, which means simple and able practise followed by man, al-thubt wa al-'umūm, which means regular and general basis that remains and does not change, and al-shumūl, which means universal and covers all areas of human life. Syed Naquib al-Attas (2001).

3.0 Methodology Research

3.1 Data Analysis of Students Understanding of Pragmatism and Islamic Perspective

3.1.1 Instrument of Study

This study instrumented a survey questionnaire in gathering the required data. The survey involved 40 students, most of whom were final-year students, with only few first- and second-year students recruited for good measure. Most of them who are not from Islamic background studies or not from Islamic school. For the questionnaire, convenience sampling was employed and the questionnaire was divided for two category; (1) Concept of pragmatism and (2) Understanding of pragmatism. The personal

information of the participants was made confidential. Then the data were examined by using descriptive statistical analysis. The data were reported in the form of standard deviation values and percentage as per below.

3.1.2 Background of the Respondents

Table 1: Number of respondents by gender

No	Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Male	19	47.5
2	Female	21	52.5
	Total	40	100.00

According to Table 1, the total number of male respondents in this study was 19 (47.5%) while the total number of female respondents was 21 (52.5%). Despite the fact that the respondents were chosen at random by the researcher, it is clear that the number of female respondents was significantly higher than the number of male respondents.

3.1.3 Respondents' Pre- College Education

Table 2: Respondent's Pre- College Education

No	Pre-college Education	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Islamic School	5	12.5
2	Non- Islamic School	35	87.5
	Total	40	100.00

Table 2 shows that the percentage of students attending non-Islamic schools was higher than the percentage of students attending Islamic schools. 35 students (87.5%) attended non-Islamic school while only 5 respondents (12.5%) attended Islamic schools.

3.1.3 Respondents' Understanding of the Concept of Pragmatism and Islamic Perspective

Table 3 shows the respondents' responses regarding the concept of pragmatism. From the total of 15 questions featured in the questionnaire, 10 of them were about the students' understanding of pragmatism and Islamic perspective.

Table 3: Respondents' Answers to Selected 10 Questions

Frequency & Percentage						
No	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	We can do anything as long as it will bring benefits to us	5 (12.5%)	4 (10%)	15 (37.5%)	15 (37.5%)	1 (2.5%)

2	Truth is man-made and can change depends on us	1 (2.5%)	11 (27.5%)	12 (30%)	16 (40%)	-
3	Pragmatism is an action and can be practised in any circumstance	-	3 (7.5%)	23 (57.5%)	14 (35%)	-
4	<i>Waqiyah</i> in Islam and realistic are similar to pragmatism	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	22 (55%)	14 (35%)	-
5	We can destroy anything if it benefits us even it is in the expense of others	11 (27.5%)	10 (25%)	12 (30%)	7 (17.5%)	-
6	A person can steal to survive life	19 (47.5%)	13 (32.5%)	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.5%)	-
7	We can break our fast if we cannot continue until <i>Maghrib</i> without a strong reason	24 (60%)	7 (17.5%)	6 (15%)	3 (7.5%)	-
8	Ethics and morals can be based on reason and mind only	4 (10%)	13 (32.5 %)	17 (42.5%)	6 (15%)	-
9	We can change any law to make people satisfied	11 (27.5%)	12 (30%)	11 (27.5%)	5 (12.5%)	1 (2.5%)
10	We can do whatever we want as long as it is beneficial to us	6 (15%)	11 (27.5%)	12 (30%)	11 (27.5%)	-

The findings revealed the average level of understanding of pragmatism among the students. This average of knowledge on the concept of pragmatism signifies that most students at this university are not exposed to the ideology of pragmatism, and are unaware of the impact of this ideology on their lives as Muslims.

This can be reflected from the percentage of students agreeing and being neutral to the first statement featured in the questionnaire. 40% of the respondents acknowledged that human can do anything as long as it brings benefit to them, while another 40% were indecisive. This shows that majority of the respondents were confused about the concept of pragmatism here.

Pragmatism is a critical issue to be aware of. This is because it is relevant to our daily lives, and if people cannot distinguish between *Waqiyah* and realistic Islamic principles, they will stray from the straight path or from the true teaching of Islam. Therefore, there is a need to clear this confusion among students.

In Malaysia, the understanding of pragmatism is not common; people are generally unaware of this ideology, despite the fact that it exists among them. This can be as evidenced from the findings for the second question. Looking at their stance on the statement that truth is man-made and susceptible to changes, most of the students were leaning towards the ideology of pragmatism with 40% (16) of them agreeing to it, and 30% were indecisive. This shows that these students whether consciously or

unconsciously undertake the viewpoint of pragmatism in their lives. As oppose to this believe, according to Islamic principle, we have already known that only Allah can judge ourselves and only He can guarantee our place in the hereafter or change any law, so we will follow and obey all the commandments revealed to Prophet Muhammad. But, people nowadays have more freedom, and they sometimes believe they can change the law to make it more reliable for our modern world.

The ethics and morals in Islam are very well explained. Enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil, as stated in the Qurān and hadith. There are many verses in Qurān that encourage Muslims to do good things, such as in Surah Ali Imran verse 104 and Surah an-Nal verse 90. As a result, we cannot simply do anything at our own convenience without adhering to Islam's true teachings and rules. Allah has revealed the guidelines to living to Prophet Muhammad to be followed and practiced by the Muslims. In this study, the percentage of students who understand revelation about deed and action was quite high. For question three, 35% (14) of students understood the statement of deed and action and are aware of the consequences of doing a good or bad action and deed.

This ideology of pragmatism is claimed by its supporters to be relevant in any situation, therefore can be adopted in surviving the modern world. Based on the findings, 35% of the respondents likened the concept of Waqīyah with the concept of pragmatism, while majority of them were indecisive. This shows that the participants did not really understand the difference between Islamic ideology and pragmatism ideology as nowadays they are more influenced by Western culture and lifestyle than by the teachings of the Qurān and hadith.

The statement from question number 5 was also about people's actions and deeds. This statement or question was asking if we can destroy anything as long as it benefits us, even if it means sacrificing others. As we all know, in Islam, there is a principle known as the Maqāsīd Syariāh, and according to this law, we cannot sacrifice others for our own benefit, and there is no power in this world other than Allah. As a result, we must look after each other in every situation. Students' understanding of this question is high with 27.5% (11) of them disagreed that human cannot destroy something or sacrifice others for his own use. Only 17.5% (7) of students agreed that we can destroy something or sacrifice others for our own benefit.

Question 6 is also related to the true teaching of Islam, or Maqāsīd Syariāh. As we all know, Allah has already mentioned and stressed on the forbiddance against stealing in the Qur'ān. Stealing is forbidden in Islam, even if we cannot find another way to survive. There are other Qurānic verses prohibiting Muslims to engage in anything harmful to ourselves. From the survey, 90% or (33) of students strongly disagreed that we can steal for the sake of surviving life. This is in line with the teaching of Islam and contradicts the ideology of pragmatism which allows people to steal as long as they perceive stealing as a good thing or they do it to save their lives.

For question 7 which states that we can break our fast if we are unable to continue until dawn for any reason, 77% or (31) students strongly disagrees with this statement. According to Islam, Muslims cannot break their fast without a compelling reason. Muslims are only allowed to do so if persisting to fast would be detrimental to health. Islam does not compel its followers to engage in activities that are harmful to our health. From the findings for this question, it can be concluded that the students understand their responsibility as Allah's vicegerent and rely on Allah for everything. Men will go to any

length to achieve their goals in life, but Allah is the master planner of all things. This really contradicts pragmatism, and as we can see here there are no similarities between pragmatism and Waqiyah.

In terms of morality and ethics, 42.5% or (17) students rejected the practice of morality and ethics without the presence of religion, while another 32.5% (13) were uncertain. When it comes to ethics and morals, as Muslims, we have been taught about the concept of akhlaq since childhood until adulthood. There are two kinds of akhlaq namely *maḥmudah* and *māzmumah*. Generally, *maḥmudah* refers to good deed, while *māzmumah* is bad deed. Islam demonstrates itself as a practical or realistic way based on Qur'ān rather than depending solely on human minds. For example, pragmatists can lie if they believe it will make people calm in any situation, which is contradictory to Islam's way of life. Another example of pragmatism ethics is when parents want to bring their child to see a dentist, and their child asks if it will make them feel pain after seeing a dentist, pragmatists can lie to their child based on their reason.

Based on the analysis, 57.5% or 23 of the students disagreed with the statement that laws are changeable according to our convenience. As a Muslim, we must follow our Shariah or Islamic primary rule which is completely suitable and applicable in all aspects of life. This shows the comprehensive guidance to living provided by Islam which encompasses the aspects of economics, politics, education, and other aspects in life. As a result, there is no need for us to change the law that Islam has established for us because it is both practical and fair in all aspects. In the context of this institution, although there are no lecture classes for most of the time, the obligation of prayer does not change. Students still have to pray 5 times a day and even with the presence of lecture classes, students still have to manage themselves to pray accordingly. They cannot change the obligation as they like due to tight schedule of class. In performing the prayer, Islam provides no restriction on the place to pray, sufficient time period for each prayer, and flexibility in terms praying attire as long as it meets the requirement of covering the aurah. This shows that Islam is strict but practical.

As for statement number 10, 42% or 17 students disagreed that we can change the law or do whatever we want as long as it benefits us. This statement, once again, contradicts Islamic principles and law. This is because, we will be judged for what we do in this world, whether it is against Islam or not. Therefore, this serves as a guide and reminder to Muslims on the element of accountability thus making Muslims more cautious in every action to be done. In Islam, the end does not determine the means which has been highlighted numbers of times by the Qurān and Hadīth. Islam highlights the importance of being practical with the guidance from the Qurān and Hadīth.

Based on this result discussion, For students understanding, it is important for the lecturers at this university to focus more on these issues in order to ensure that all of the students here are aware of and understand the concept of pragmatism, in order to protect their faith from any aspects of the concept that are contrary to the true teachings of Islam, such as the concept of Waqiyah.

Also there is need for other relevant parties to play a significant role in helping making the students informed of the issue. Islamic committees, village committees, and parents, for example, should train children to connect themselves to the mosque and musollah in order to strengthen their faith, as well as to train them to attend religious activities in their area.

4.0 Conclusion

Pragmatism is a philosophy that was developed to address the issues in the Western society. William James, an American philosopher, popularised this idea through his lectures and writings. Despite the efforts to liberate new philosophical thinking from abstract metaphysical and philosophical discussions, pragmatism generally continues the tradition of humanism, liberalism, and rationalism-empiricism. James has brought the practical-instrumental thought, scientifically interpreted religion through experience, advocated melioristic ethics, and adhered to pluralistic and relative truths as parts of the foundation of pragmatism.

This way of thinking also only considers the material in which understanding Islam is not a basic necessity but rather a supplement to the needs. Islam never denies the need for material development, economic growth, scientific and technological advancement, but if people only focus on those aspects and ignore the other fundamental aspects, this will lead human to destruction and setbacks rather than real development. Humanism-egoism, free interpretation of religion, and value relativism brought by James and pragmatism are all rejected by Islam.

To summarise, as the ideology of pragmatism is damaging to the student's faith and beliefs and contradictory to Islam, educators at this institution must have adequate knowledge and employ varieties of approaches to make students aware of the danger of this ideology that they might submit to it consciously or unconsciously. This knowledge would be beneficial to them and would enable them to protect themselves from any wrongdoing contrary to Islamic principles.

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