Pragmatism comes in when there are live issues that need to be dealt with. Whenever that occurs, Hoff's formulation of "a set of principles and beliefs that are constantly subject to critique and change" is sane and healthy (120 [2006]: 296). This does not imply that such principles may be thrown out at will. To suggest, as Scholes does, that Hoff's position involves only passion and is bereft of reason is false. Hoff rightly says that in practicing pragmatism, "we must recognize the effects, large and small, that our beliefs make manifest in the world." That takes reasoning. "Pragmatism is inherently a critical endeavor."

Hoff's letter is a brief statement of a philosophical position and cannot be taken as a full-scale defense of pragmatism. On the other hand, Scholes's remarks can be taken as a full-scale rejection of pragmatism. If Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and other neopragmatists are the real problem, as Scholes says, then he should not have written in such a way as to imply that pragmatism as a general philosophical position is the target of his criticism.

Arthur Efron
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Reply:

Arthur Efron's letter is both smart and thoughtful, so much so that it may be unanswerable. I may simply have been wrong to insist that there are moral principles immune to historical change. Certainly, I agree that the example of slavery is vulnerable to the critique Efron has proposed. But this is a complex issue. If we can examine history and see Britain and America evolve from acceptance of slavery to rejection of it, we can then ask what drove this evolution in belief. I would like to suggest that the principle was there all along but that it took us some time to discover it. Some people, as Efron points out, still do not acknowledge it. From the perspective I am proposing, this might mean that they are behind us in historical development. Such a view, I am aware, appears dangerously Hegelian, but it seems to me no more dangerous than allowing modern slave drivers the right to the opinions of their own interpretive communities.

Efron offers me a way out, of course. I can be critical of neopragmatists, he suggests, without blaming pragmatism. And I do take issue with neopragmatists and have done so for some time. But pragmatism itself, it seems to me, claims to be based on a fixed principle, or perhaps a metaprinciple that assumes that fixed principles do not exist in our world. To this we might add, as Stanley Fish would no doubt suggest, that such principles should not exist and that this is a good thing, too. And that further step might be used to distinguish the new from the old pragmatism.

What worries me most about the view I am opposing is that it seems to leave no room for reason or persuasion in human affairs. If we cannot appeal to principles, how can we reason with others? And how can we teach our young people about ethical matters? It is not enough, I think, to say simply that this is the way we do things, or this is the way we think now and it is right because it is we who think it and now when we think it. If it goes against the principles of pragmatism to believe in fixed principles, the paradoxical nature of this situation may help us to maintain our view that some values are better than others, because they are closer to the principles that lie at the end of the evolutionary road. And I think we need to believe that they are there, no matter how skeptical we must be about our ability to attain them.

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