The following definition is from Peirce's twenty-two-page manuscript review of Herbert Nicholls's Treatise on Causality (1904). With masterful succinctness Peirce explains that pragmatism is not a philosophy of practical results but a method in logic. Based on the proposition that the sign relation is the essence of thinking, pragmatism tends to promote a realist, rather than nominalist, acceptance of the world of everyday, commonsense experience.

Source: MS 1476.

No criticism of such a book, no characterization of it, not even as slight a one as that here to be attempted, can have any meaning until the standpoint of the critic's observations be recognized. Our standpoint will be pragmatism; but this word has been so loosely used, that a partial explanation of its nature is needful, with some indications of the intricate process by which those who hold it become assured of its truth. If philosophy is ever to become a sound science, its students must submit themselves to that same ethics of terminology that students of chemistry and taxonomic biology observe; and when a word has been invented for the declared purpose of conveying a precisely defined meaning, they must give up their habit of using it for every other purpose that may happen to hit their fancy at the moment. The word pragmatism was invented to express a certain maxim of logic, which, as was shown at its first enunciation, involves a whole system of philosophy. The maxim is intended to furnish a method for the analysis of concepts. A concept is something having the mode of being of a general type which is, or may be, made, the rational part of the purport of a word. A more precise or fuller definition cannot here be attempted. The method prescribed in the maxim is to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences, that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct,—of the affirmation or denial of the concept; and the assertion of the maxim is that herein lies the whole of the purport of the word, the entire concept. The sedulous exclusion from this statement of all reference to sensation is specially to be remarked. Such a distinction as that between red and blue is held to form no part of the concept. This maxim is put forth neither as a handy tool to serve so far as it may be found serviceable, nor as a self-evident truth, but as a far-reaching theorem solidly grounded upon an elaborate study of the nature of signs. Every thought, or cognitive representation, is of the nature of a sign. "Representation" and "sign" are synonyms. The whole purpose of a sign is that it shall be interpreted in another sign; and its whole purport lies in the special character which it imparts to that interpretation. When a sign determines an interpretation of itself in another sign, it produces an effect external to itself, a physical effect, though the sign producing the effect may itself be not an existent object but merely a type. It produces this effect, not in this or that metaphysical sense, but in an indisputable sense. As to this, it is to be remarked that actions beyond the reach of self-control are not subjects of blame. Thinking is a kind of action, and reasoning is a kind of deliberate action; and to call an argument illogical, or a proposition false, is a special kind of moral judgment, and as such is applicable to what we cannot help. This does not deny that what cannot be conceived today may be conceivable tomorrow. But just as long as we cannot help adopting a mode of thought, so long it must be thoroughly accepted as true. Any doubt of it is idle makebelieve and irredeemable paper. Now we all do regard, and cannot help regarding, signs as affecting their interpretant signs. It is by a patient examination of the various modes (some of them quite disparate) of interpretations of signs, and of the connections between these (an exploration in which one ought, if possible, to provide himself with a guide, or, if that cannot be, to prepare his courage to see one conception that will have to be muddled peering over the head of another, and soon another peering over that, and so on, until he shall begin to think there is to be no end of it, or that life will not be long enough to complete the study) that the pragmatist has at length, to his great astonishment, emerged from the disheartening labyrinth with this simple maxim in his hand. In distrust of so surprising a result he has searched for some flaw in its method, and for some case in which it should break down, but after every deep-laid plot for disproving it that long-working ingenuity could devise has recoiled upon his own head, and all doubts he could start have been exhausted, he has been forced at last to acknowledge its truth. This
maxim once accepted,—intelligently accepted, in the light of the evidence of its truth,—speedily sweeps all metaphysical rubbish out of one's house. Each abstraction is either pronounced to be gibberish or is provided with a plain, practical definition. The general leaning of the results is toward what the idealists call the naïve, toward common sense, toward anthropomorphism. Thus, for example, the real becomes that which is such as it is regardless of what you or I or any of our folks may think it to be. The external becomes that element which is such as it is regardless of what somebody thinks, feels, or does, whether about that external object or about anything else. Accordingly, the external is necessarily real, while the real may or may not be external; nor is anything absolutely external nor absolutely devoid of externality. Every assertory proposition refers to something external, and even a dream withstands us sufficiently for one description to be true of it and another not. The existent is that which reacts against other things. Consequently, the external world, (that is, the world that is comparatively external) does not consist of existent objects merely, nor merely of these and their reactions; but on the contrary, its most important reals have the mode of being of what the nominalist calls "mere" words, that is, general types and would-bes. The nominalist is right in saying that they are substantially of the nature of words; but his "mere" reveals a complete misunderstanding of what our everyday world consists of.