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Truth and the Pragmatic Theory of Learning

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Introduction

Pragmatism does not simply offer another competing theory of truth. The meanings of truth are many, as Peirce, James, and Dewey have observed. Debates over the nature of truth appeal to different intuitions about truth. They can be lexically enumerated, yet dictionaries also indicate a common root for the term. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* we read:

Truth. 1. The character of being, or disposition to be, true to a person, principle, cause, etc.; faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy, steadfast allegiance. (See also troth). 2. One's faith or loyalty as pledged in a promise or agreement; a solemn engagement or promise, a covenant: = troth.

Root meanings of truth are based on *fidelity* and *commitment*. Truth is about values. When someone is not able to stay true or be true, we call them "wrong." When someone says something untrue, we call them "wrong." When we need an explanation why a person has the truth or is in the wrong, then we appeal to one or another view of truth – how one can come into the truth. Pragmatism duly regards truth as a valuational and normative matter, and it acknowledges the plurality of views on truth.

A Synoptic View of Theories of Truth

A description of how a person can come into possession of truth is a theory of truth in

miniature, even if, at first, that description at most expresses an intuition. Developing an intuitive view of truth into a full account reasonably covering all knowers is serious philosophical work. Pursuing the additional question of whether one of those theories about knowing truth is most satisfactory is traditionally labeled as *epistemology*.

In epistemology, establishing one theory of truth while denying that rival theories are sensible is extremely difficult. Intuitions behind all those theories can be compelling and indispensable as any. Justifying one theory as more “truthful” to the nature of truth risks circularity, since appealing to that theory’s own intuitive basis begs the question, and any higher epistemic criterion must cohere with that theory of truth itself, again begging the question. Pragmatism is neither a singular theory of truth seeking greater validity than the rest nor a metaepistemic criterion passing judgment on all theories of truth. It offers an expansive theory of learning that accounts for the valuable ways that humans can faithfully appreciate reality.

As a first approximation, the following table lists nine views of truth, distinguished by their preferences about the provenance and temporality of truth.

Justifying truth by	Senses alone	Senses and reason	Reason alone
Nature of truth is			
Retrospective	<i>Empiricism:</i> truth is what has occurred in experience	<i>Realism:</i> truth is what reasonable belief corresponds with	<i>Rationalism:</i> truth is what necessary principles require
Circumspective	<i>Journalism:</i> truth is whatever is happening in experience	<i>Relativism:</i> truth is what is instructed by each culture	<i>Coherentism:</i> truth is whatever axiomatic systems affirm
Prospective	<i>Positivism:</i> truth is what will be arriving in experience	<i>Experimentalism:</i> truth is what will be learned by experiment	<i>Deductivism:</i> truth is what will be logically inferred

Each major pragmatist offered a formulation of experimentalism in order to rival views of truth loyal only to the senses or to reason. For William James, the “true” is “only the expedient in the way of our thinking.” (James 2011, 226) Dewey said, “The best definition of truth from the logical standpoint which is known to me is that by Peirce: ‘The opinion which is fated to be ultimately

agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real’” (Dewey 1938, 343n). These pragmatists never naively supposed that their preferred view of truth was true to every way that “truth” is ordinarily used in common language. It is no real criticism of pragmatism to point out that asking the truth from a person testifying on the witness stand during a trial cannot be covered by experimentalism (since trials expect retrospective truth from witnesses).

Pragmatism is not reducible to experimentalism, or to its cousins in philosophy of science, instrumentalism, and operationalism. Pragmatism is not primarily a theory of truth. Instead, pragmatism is better understood as a general theory of human learning and knowledge which combines the best features of realism, relativism, and experimentalism. Pragmatism sides with realism’s expectation that intelligence does reach the objectively real and takes relativism’s point that knowledge at any particular historical moment will be partial and perspectival rather than monolithic. As for the other six views of truth, pragmatism regards them as descriptions of stages or phases of intelligent inquiry to be treated as self-sufficient for limited purposes.

Pragmatism connects truth with learning, using a simple link through the concept of knowledge. If everything that can be *known* must be first *learned*, and if knowledge aims at *truth*, then the method of learning should aim at the truth. But this simple formula invites three approaches to learning. (1) Do we have a better grasp of the nature of truth? Then we should coordinate our learning methodology with this “truth” so that we can understand how knowledge is possible. (2) Alternatively, do we have a better grasp of how we actually do learn? Then our notion of truth should be constructed accordingly, so that what is knowable by learning is the truth. (3) Finally, we might suppose that we already have sufficient grasp of both “truth” and “learning,” leaving us with the question of whether knowledge is possible. If they are in harmony, (3a) knowledge is possible, but if not, then (3b) we must be skeptics about the possibility of knowledge.

Philosophers who have chosen path (1) are usually classified as rationalists. They start from a vision of truth and infer how the mind possesses the powers of knowing this truth. Philosophers who instead opt for path (2) are usually called “empiricists.” They proceed from a theory of human learning to determine what is knowable and only then proceed to define the nature of truth in terms of what is knowable. Option (3a) is distinguishable from rationalism, but in actual practice, since the result is the same in both cases, both (1) and (3a) philosophers take the rationalist course. However, option (3b) cannot be assimilated into (2), since (3b) does not agree that truth should be defined in terms of what is knowable. Philosophers who prefer (3b) are best termed “skeptics” since they use an independently ascertained notion of truth to explain why we cannot possess knowledge of the truth.

Pragmatism seeks to avoid both rationalism and skepticism by making novel developments to the tradition of empiricism – its “naturalizing” and “historicizing” contributions.

Learning and Knowledge in a Naturalistic Context

The first contribution lies in pragmatism’s efforts to naturalize our understanding of human learning and knowledge. Pragmatists disdain any rationalistic determination of truth or knowledge performed independently of an understanding of actual human learning. Pragmatism is quite often lumped together with skepticism by rationalists, since rationalists are disdainful of pragmatism’s willful disregard for what must be, in their view, the “real” nature of truth. Rationalists typically claim that on the pragmatic theory of knowledge, we would be barred from knowledge of truth and limited to learning only what is pragmatically relevant. Rationalism, in the form of absolute idealism, ruled the philosophical scene when the primary pragmatists began their struggle to revive empiricism. But long after the demise of absolute idealism, rationalism remain alive today in many guises. For example, it is quite common for a

present-day epistemologist to grudgingly admit that pragmatism has made contributions to the understanding of human learning. Yet that same epistemologist makes sure to disclaim any pragmatic influence on his own theory of knowledge. A popular way to keep pragmatism at bay is to assert that pragmatism offers only a “non-epistemic” theory of knowledge, and thus cannot be relevant for the epistemologist who is solely concerned with an “epistemic” theory of knowledge. “Epistemic” in this context means that such a theory of knowledge is concerned with the relationship between knowledge and truth. A “nonepistemic” theory, for this epistemologist, ignores truth and instead probes other mundane causes for belief besides the pure quest to know the truth.

But this attempted demarcation simply begs the whole issue, since the epistemologist is evidently relying on some definition of truth that stands independently from a theory of actual human learning and knowledge acquisition. The fundamental disagreement is exposed when the pragmatist retorts that she is indeed concerned with the relationship between knowledge and truth and refuses to admit any conception of truth having origins independent from the theory of human knowledge. If the epistemologist responds that there is in fact a concept of truth on which “the truth” exists independently of any and all human learning, that strongly rationalist metaphysical position only earns scorn from pragmatists. Pragmatism would not attempt to make sense of a notion of a truth or a reality completely transcendent of all possible human knowing. Of course there are realities yet to be known, and we could not adequately understand human learning without a notion of that realm. But by “truth” a pragmatist simply refers to what is and will be known, because any other notion of truth lacks useful meaning. That is why pragmatists reject the “justified true belief” theory of knowledge – fully justified belief simply is what we can possibly mean by true belief. Allowing “truth” to float freely as a superfluous criterion for knowledge invites in the rationalistic notion of truth divorced from actual human powers of conception and learning. Rationalists categorize philosophies as

“realist” if they admit the existence of a completely transcendent truth/reality independent of human knowledge. If pragmatism cannot be metaphysically realistic, can it be realistic in any sense?

Metaphysical, or transcendental, realists have traditionally answered negatively, because they assume that a denial of realism entails an acceptance of idealism. Idealism, by claiming that all reality must be characterized by mental qualities or activities, does indeed hold that there cannot be any reality forever beyond knowing minds (human and/or divine). But idealism can be, and very often is, just as rationalistic as metaphysical realism. Pragmatists have developed many of the most powerful objections to forms of idealism. However, by assuming that idealism is the only alternative to realism, metaphysical realists are driven to classify pragmatism as an idealism of either the personal relativism or social relativism kind. Metaphysical realists are particularly tempted to find in pragmatism only idealism because of pragmatism’s explicit adoption of empiricism. In modern philosophy since Descartes, empiricism has indeed been closely linked to idealisms and especially to personal, or subjective, idealism. Instead of allying with idealism, pragmatists have undertaken the task of “naturalizing” experience, learning, knowledge, and truth.

Although scientific reductionism has claimed the label of naturalism for itself, pragmatism resists. The role of the learner cannot be irrelevant to the reality known. First, scientific inquiry is nothing but the effort of human learning to better understand the ongoing relationships among observable matters. Thus, proper objects of scientific knowledge include those observable matters – the matters to be explained cannot be less real or unreal by comparison to the related matters explaining them. Second, scientific inquiry discovers those dependable relations among natural matters only through our deliberate conduct of experimental inquiry, and confirmed results enhance our potential control over the environing world. The experiential processes of controlled inquiry cannot be relegated to any subjective or unreal status – they are as naturally real

as any unobservable entities postulated by subatomic physics. Philosophical intuitions or reasonings that judge experience to be irredeemably detached from the world have no standing with pragmatism, either. The genuine growth of human knowledge requires that this growth exists within a wider context of experienceable nature whose existence is independent of, but not transcendent of, human learning.

Learning and Knowledge in a Historical Context

Pragmatism’s second special contribution to empiricism lies in its historical standpoint on the nature of learning. Empiricism, like rationalism, traditionally assumed that the central faculties responsible for learning have not altered their functioning for as long as humans have been on the planet. Pragmatism rejected that ahistorical psychology, finding that human intelligence was itself an evolving and growing power. Furthermore, scientific methods of experimental inquiry are recent inventions, showing how the best methods for human learning can develop over time.

Most of humanity still relies on their relatively fixed set of habitual beliefs, modifiable mostly by less-than-scientific methods. Three lower modes of belief have always been available, and until recent centuries, these have been the only methods available. The first mode is the period of infancy and young childhood, during which imitation and emulation build up habits of practice. The second mode is to place unquestioning confidence in the common beliefs of one’s society, which seem enduringly intuitive and familiar. Peirce called this second stage the “method of tenacity.” The third mode is to resort to the respected rules of one’s society whenever troublesome situations arise and to stand by those rules even if they prove useless. Peirce called this third stage the “method of authority.” The fourth stage is the “method of science,” which is characterized by a higher-level logic of inference that can propose alternative rules appropriate to situations,

and thus provide for a wider variety of alternative habits available for testing.

Pragmatism prefers tried and tested rules for controlling belief, and therefore it endorses fallibilism: Any item of knowledge might be modified or overturned by future experimental inquiry. This position is not a retreat into anything-goes relativism or a resignation to skepticism. It is fallacious to think that just because any item of acquired knowledge may be amendable by future inquiry, most or all of knowledge must be wildly inaccurate or that humanity is fated to forever know very little about the world. Skepticism towards knowledge is unwarranted because discovering the inadequacy of some knowledge occurs only through the discovery of other, better knowledge.

Pragmatism characterizes skepticism as a consequence of demanding too much from any individual learner. Knowledge, however, is never primarily the possession of anyone in the singular. The smallest unit possessing knowledge is the community of inquirers; a person has knowledge only in virtue of being a participating member. Learning is entirely social in nature, and methods of inquiry are likewise communal. Because the amount of knowledge is presently so vast, we now credit memorization as a form of knowledge, but this derivative “knowing” is not the primary mode of learning. The acquisition of new knowledge is confirmed through the inquiries of communities, never those of a single individual. Only a community can confirm that experiments are conducted properly, and results are repeatable and reported accurately.

Communities skilled in conducting scientific inquiries (inquiries avoiding poor observations and fallacious reasoning, and utilizing advanced abductive procedures permitting future self-correction) are together responsible for accumulating knowledge in a coherent manner. Scientific disciplines can correct each other, for no science can falsify another science’s knowledge, yet a science can reveal another science’s knowledge to be limited, partial, and perspectival. As there is no supreme independent method for adjudicating among sciences or ranking sciences, the sciences themselves are responsible for determining how

they possess perspectival knowledge of their subject matters and how best to coordinate their respective ontologies.

Pragmatism and the Primacy of Science

No scientific discipline ever needs to compromise on knowledge with a less-than-scientific community, or with cultural convictions generally. Cultures are replete with valuable practices that work well enough without hardly anyone understanding why they work, so memorable narratives do the work of conveying credibility to succeeding generations rather than scientific explanations. Pragmatism understands the philosophical anthropology behind traditions and narratives about cultural practices, but it cannot lift cultural narratives aiding convenience or prosperity to a cognitive status higher than science.

Pragmatism is not about legitimizing a utilitarian criterion for truth, pragmatism denies that learning is controlled by popularity, and pragmatism rejects the idealistic view that one’s society dictates what one can know. The scientific knowledge of the few always overrides the habitual beliefs of millions, no matter how tenaciously held. Science is not just another cultural practice or cultural authority alongside all the rest. Science established its own standards of conduct in order to form inquiry communities devoted to testing and disproving beliefs, not to form a culture propagated by conforming consensus. A “scientific culture” is any culture relying primarily on science for material and civic advancement, not a separate kind of culture to rival others.

Social sciences studying how cultures like to describe the world, and discovering why a group maintains a belief in something, are not inquiring into whether that thing is real. For example, understanding that an indigenous group blames malevolent spirits for illnesses is not equivalent to learning about those spirits or confirming their reality. Whatever passes for learning within a culture does not automatically make the resulting beliefs instances of genuine learning or knowledge. A social science paradigm presuming that

the acceptance of cultural narratives is necessary for comprehending a culture simply abandons science. Cultural studies preferring relativism about knowledge fall to an intellectual level below science. Educational theory can be pragmatist in spirit by prioritizing experimental inquiry without adopting social relativism about truth or knowledge.

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