

On Taking a Pragmatic Attitude Toward Truth

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Educational theorists and practitioners who are inclined to associate ways of thinking about schooling, learning, and related issues with ways of thinking about truth and knowledge face at least two dangers. One is that they will adopt a traditional approach that identifies truth with direct correspondence between the distinct realms of “ideas” and “reality.” While this approach has a long history and perhaps some intuitive appeal, the course of philosophy over the last century has revealed a much more complicated situation that makes straightforward correspondence theories largely untenable. That history, and associated developments in science and social theory, has led directly to the second danger: the temptation to dismiss talk about truth and knowledge as outdated, trivial, or otherwise irrelevant to educational thought and practice. The principal objective of this paper is to recover and describe a way of thinking about truth that (1) acknowledges and incorporates current trends in the fields of epistemology and philosophy of mind; (2) retains a meaningful concept of truth; and (3) suggests implications for the field of education.

My point of departure is the claim, made by Richard Rorty, that “there is little to be said about truth.”¹ Rorty associates this assertion with pragmatism, at least with what he considers to be the best in pragmatism. His point in making it is that we (philosophers and others) ought to spend our time and energy exploring more relevant and practical questions, such as how to make society better; and furthermore that we ought to be satisfied with the idea of justification as a substitute for the idea of truth.

Interestingly, Rorty turns for support to the analysis of truth provided by Donald Davidson, who explicitly does not consider himself a pragmatist. At the same time, Rorty knowingly disagrees with a number of pragmatists, classical and contemporary, in advancing his view of truth. Given this curious scenario, it seems natural to explore the relationships between these views. The aim of this paper is not to evaluate any particular theory of truth, let alone to identify it with pragmatism. Rather, my discussion clarifies a general pragmatic attitude toward truth, and gestures at what a “theory of truth” would mean to someone assuming that attitude. In doing so, I argue that pragmatism is broad enough to sustain a debate among competing views regarding truth. Finally, I identify some features of an approach to education and learning that follow from adopting a pragmatic attitude toward truth.

RORTY, PRAGMATISM, AND TRUTH

Rorty offers a particularly inspiring picture of the pragmatic enterprise, especially in its classical manifestation. He identifies several key characteristics common to Peirce, James, and Dewey, the three thinkers he identifies as the classical pragmatists. First, these philosophers were anti-dualistic. By this Rorty means that pragmatism actively seeks to disrupt or deemphasize the neat dichotomies characteristic of Enlightenment rationality. Among these dualisms are those between

appearance and reality, between facts and values, and between spirit and matter. Instead, pragmatists tend to speak about “fuzzier”² matters, emphasizing relationships (between man and nature, for instance, or reason and emotion), continuity, and processes.

Additionally, Rorty emphasizes the pragmatists’ orientation toward the future. Thus, Dewey is frequently and intensely concerned with democratic participation as a means of producing growth and progress toward a better social future. Peirce envisions a community of scientists oriented toward an ideal future vantage point, and James (following Peirce) explicitly makes consequences the test of any action or belief. Closely tied to this forward-looking mentality is a pragmatic concern for usefulness (already indicated in James’ focus on consequences). Here the problem-solving approach implicit in the description of pragmatism so far comes to the foreground. In science, ethics, and social philosophy alike, what is ‘true’ comes to mean what is useful to people. In James’ formulation, for instance, the truth of a belief is evaluated based on its capacity to help us organize and understand the rest of our existing experiences and beliefs.³ On a more general level, the result is that philosophy becomes subordinate to human interest, another reversal of Enlightenment presumptions.

A couple of interesting observations can be made here about Rorty’s account of pragmatism. First, he is curiously selective about the features of pragmatism he identifies. For instance, he barely mentions the communal nature of inquiry that was so important to all three thinkers he discusses (and to others such as George Herbert Mead). Likewise, the fallibilism intrinsic to pragmatism remains implicit in Rorty’s account. Meanwhile, Rorty’s descriptions themselves often take on a dualistic tone as they contrast pragmatic views with Enlightenment rationalism.⁴

Nevertheless, Rorty does identify important features of pragmatism, and they have a central place in his discussion of truth. The key observation Rorty makes about the pragmatic view of truth follows closely from its orientation toward the future: pragmatists seek to replace the concept of “certainty” with that of “hope.”⁵ It seems appropriate for Rorty to note the early pragmatists’ refusal to speak in terms of universal truth, transcendent reality, or other absolutist notions, and he thinks that the idea of hope is powerful enough to serve as a centerpiece for a new orientation to social life. The consequence of the pragmatic perspective, for Rorty, is to redirect inquiry away from truth and toward “using reality,” and in turning away from certainty to emphasize the idea of self-reliance or responsibility.⁶

An important question for those who follow Rorty this far, it seems to me, involves whether we must (or should) abandon the notion of truth (as he recommends) in order to embrace these two consequences. Rorty poses this question as a way of challenging pragmatism to distinguish between justification and truth.⁷ Rorty observes that some pragmatists, in response to this dilemma, conceive of truth simply as justification under some set of ideal circumstances. Contrary to Rorty’s portrayal, Peirce (who developed this idea most explicitly) attaches great importance to the role of truth that emerges in this picture.⁸ Rorty’s preference, and that of Dewey, he says, is to quit talking about truth altogether. This strategy is better,

he thinks, because truth really just comes down to something like “what members of a given culture take to be true.” He sees this orientation toward truth as implicit in Dewey, and finds additional support for it in the work of Donald Davidson. We should turn toward Davidson’s own account of his position, then, to explore its consequences and its relationship to pragmatic views on truth.

DAVIDSON, PRAGMATISM, AND TRUTH

There are good reasons for taking seriously Rorty’s classification of Davidson as a pragmatist. For Rorty, the key consideration is brought out in Robert Brandom’s characterization of the pragmatic approach to truth as “phenomenalist.”⁹ By this he means that pragmatist accounts always begin with an analysis of the ways in which people *come to hold* certain beliefs and assertions to be true. This emphasis on the human *act* of “taking-to-be-true,” rather than a quality, truth, of *objects* (such as beliefs or statements) makes truth a secondary issue, derived from those “takings.”

According to Rorty, Davidson takes the same approach in “The Structure and Content of Truth.”¹⁰ He seems to be right about this. Davidson begins his discussion with an explanation of Tarski’s analysis of truth and an evaluation of its importance. Essentially, Tarski (correctly, according to Davidson) views truth as a concept that accompanies language, but his work neither offers a definition of it nor captures its important connection to human beliefs and meaning. It is in this area that Davidson thinks more ought to be said about truth. In this sense he, like the pragmatists, starts with an analysis of “truth-taking.” In fact he quite clearly recognizes the similarity between his view and Dewey’s.¹¹

Still, Davidson refuses to identify himself with pragmatism. The main reason is that he, like Rorty, views the pragmatists as equating truth with justification, thereby taking what he considers to be a wrong turn in the direction of their inquiry into truth. Davidson, on the other hand, quite clearly believes that there is much more to say about truth than just what there is to say about justification. His emphasis on the beliefs, desires, and intentions of people leads him into a detailed analysis of understanding and interpretation. On his view, truth operates (in each of us) as a “primitive concept,” not susceptible to explanation, yet indispensable and intuitively familiar to everyone.¹² It is not my intent to pursue the details of Davidson’s theory, but it is important to note both that it begins with the idea, in Brandom’s terms, of “taking-to-be-true,” and that its most important and interesting elements (by Davidson’s own account) have to do with social interaction and meaning-making. It is also of note that Davidson parts ways with the pragmatists over the very point that prompts Rorty to classify him *with* the pragmatists. In doing so, he both implicitly and explicitly rejects Rorty’s interpretation of his views.

This last observation becomes even more notable (and confusing) when we return to Brandom. His interpretation of the early pragmatists leaves it very unclear whether all (or any, really) of them can be said to simply reduce the notion of truth to that of justification. It is true that they sought to detach truth from any idealistic or correspondence-theory moorings, and one result was that they identified a closer connection between it and justification. But Brandom asserts that the pragmatists went *beyond* that connection in their analysis of truth, for instance by associating

truth claims with the making of normative and other commitments.¹³ Davidson makes a similar, though less specific, suggestion about Dewey, as does Putnam about James.¹⁴ Recognizing this element of commitment, of embracing truth claims and adopting them as guides for action, is essential for overcoming what Brandom calls “stereotypical pragmatism.”¹⁵ This view understands the pragmatists as viewing truth merely in terms of utility for some immediate end, and it is hard not to wonder whether Brandom has Rorty (at least partly) in mind when he uses it.

At any rate, these contemporary theorists share the recognition that the central insight of the classical pragmatists is the removal of discussions about truth from the arena of realism. This move should not be interpreted, as some commentators have done, as a move toward the opposite pole of idealism in some form or another.¹⁶ Rather, the major contribution of pragmatism is to shift the field of inquiry from these or other efforts to abstract from lived experience to a focus on that experience itself, as it occurs. This is a prominent and recurring theme in Dewey’s writings, but James also takes pains to associate pragmatism with a descriptive process of how people actually come to organize experience and take things to be true.¹⁷ And for his part, Peirce framed the whole movement of pragmatism within the recognition that (contrary to rigid rationalism or empiricism) “there is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out,’ namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time.”¹⁸

Brandom and Davidson (and to a lesser extent, Putnam) see significant flaws in what they take to be pragmatic theories of truth. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the value of the pragmatic approach, and share with Peirce, James, and Dewey an interest in continuing a dialogue about it. Brandom incorporates pragmatism’s basic approach to ‘truth-talk’ into his own ambitious project to develop a comprehensive theory of truth, language, and objectivity (which itself moves well beyond that approach).¹⁹ Everyone, it seems, wants to talk about truth but Rorty.

THE PRAGMATIC ATTITUDE

The picture I have begun to sketch is a general orientation or attitude toward truth characteristic of pragmatist philosophers. In Section I, I outlined several features of pragmatism that Rorty sees as indicating a movement away from truth toward an emphasis on justification. In Section II, I offered a brief account of Davidson’s theory of truth, with references to several other perspectives, in order to suggest that “truth talk” may still have a place in philosophy. In this section I hope to add to both of my previous analyses. In the first case, I hope that bringing to the foreground those features of pragmatism neglected by Rorty will help to develop the idea of a pragmatic attitude toward truth (that is not simply reducible to justification, as Rorty would have it). In the second, my purpose is to highlight key features of the theories of truth advanced by several of the thinkers I have discussed in order to demonstrate how pragmatism might accommodate a discussion between them. My point is not to claim that Davidson, Putnam, Brandom, or anyone else is or is not a pragmatist, but rather to suggest that they share a frame of mind, or attitude toward inquiry, in common.

I have noted that Rorty’s account of pragmatism emphasizes its detranscendentalism, that is, its turning away from absolute or universal claims.

However, there are accompanying concerns of many pragmatists to which Rorty does not pay adequate attention. For instance, largely because of its detranscendentalism, pragmatism is further characterized by its fallibilism.²⁰ Thus all belief claims, even those about truth, are subject to revision or abandonment (based on future experiences, as Rorty may want to point out). One consequence of focusing on this characteristic, I think, is to move in a direction other than that urged by Rorty. Whereas he views pragmatism as leading away from talk about truth, fallibilism indicates a shift in the way we *do* talk about it. For instance, while Dewey's instrumentalism does embody the emphases Rorty attributes to it, this does not lead Dewey away from talking about knowledge and truth. Instead, his analysis turns toward a conception of knowledge claims as provisional and verified by the opening up of new experiences and opportunities for knowledge. Thus verification is important, but always partial and subject to questioning. Dewey develops these views directly from Peirce's starting point of understanding truth from within the stream ("continuity," in Dewey's terminology) of experiences, and amidst the presumed concepts, we all find ourselves enmeshed in.²¹ From this vantage point, Dewey contrasts his "transactional" view of knowledge with "self-action," emphasizing that individuals are active components *in* the world rather than detached creators of concepts that they apply *to* the world.²²

Another element of this shift takes pragmatists toward viewing philosophical inquiry as an inherently social endeavor, another characteristic deemphasized by Rorty. Every individual's identity is intrinsically bound up with the social environment she finds herself in, and her very understanding of herself and the world are, at least in part, a product of meanings arrived at through social interaction. For James, this social component serves as an important guarantee that insulates pragmatism against the charge that it is a superficial cover for naked and short-term self-interest (from "stereotypical pragmatism," that is). Knowledge claims must be reconciled with previously held beliefs, and this process takes place discursively and publicly, which is to say, communally.²³ This is an essential component of pragmatism, which finds expression in both Dewey and Peirce and is later elaborated by Mead.²⁴ The shift in perspective it entails has been incredibly influential in theory development and dialogue in fields from philosophy of science to social theory, and it has informed contemporary debates in epistemology (as we shall discuss shortly).²⁵

There are other features typically associated with pragmatism, and other ways to describe those included here. One reason for presenting those I have included is that they seem to go a long way toward answering Rorty's concerns about the continued preoccupation with truth. For instance, when he suggests that the idea put forward by several pragmatists of an imagined 'ideal situation' is really a revival of realist inclinations, it seems necessary that he willfully ignore pragmatic fallibilism, or believe that those thinkers ignore the concept.²⁶ The point here is *not* that Rorty would dismiss these elements of pragmatism; I do not think he would. Rather, it is to suggest that highlighting these features suggests some avenues for continuing to engage in "truth talk." A look at a few of the key ideas among theories of truth we have briefly encountered can give some indication of the kinds of issues and debates that might constitute such talk.

Among a number of interesting concepts, a critically important one that emerges in Davidson's discussion of interpretation and meaning is that of triangulation. Davidson proposes a model of objectivity arrived at through the intersection of speaker, interpreter, and world.²⁷ Despite our incomplete understanding, and inability to arrive at a complete understanding, Davidson observes that human social interaction operates with a presumption of shared reality, and thus the possibility of shared understanding. This view of intersubjectivity echoes in significant ways the concerns of Peirce and Dewey in particular, though Davidson's thought emerges in a different tradition and extends concepts like intersubjectivity and objectivity in novel ways. Hilary Putnam has articulated what in places he has called pragmatic realism, which allows for various versions of "true statements" in any given situation, but locates the notion of truth in "the words it would be correct to use...in describing the situation."²⁸ What this awkward phrasing suggests is that truth is a feature of language use in social situations. As with Davidson's model, the constraints on what "it would be correct to say" have to do with language, social meaning, and common experience (the "situation"). As I have noted, Brandom, too, takes the pragmatic concern with analyzing the complexities of social interaction as a starting point for a highly technical and comprehensive formal pragmatics of language.²⁹

The point of these observations is to highlight connecting points between classical pragmatists' orientation toward truth and knowledge and lively contemporary dialogue and theorizing. Mead offers a less well-known example that nevertheless illuminates a number of these connections. He articulates a "cogency theory of truth" that incorporates the notion of coherence with an emphasis on the immediate context, and the propelling forward of the enterprise of inquiry.³⁰ Put another way, Mead demanded a holistic fit among a system of beliefs, along with shared social meaning and an effective account of experience, as demonstrated by the ability to continue to act. Mead's approach to epistemology and other areas of philosophy represent perhaps the most thorough embodiment of what I am calling the pragmatic attitude, resting as they do on a theory of identity and society rooted in human interaction.³¹

I have emphasized the similarities among these accounts, but not in order to imply that they are compatible or converge on a single theory. In fact, deep disagreements, particularly between Putnam and Davidson, have been the source of extensive debate. My point is that these thinkers, and many others, all demonstrate in important ways the central characteristics of what I have called the pragmatic attitude toward truth. That these debates can go on within this general orientation suggests that pragmatism is broad and rich enough to sustain a lively and productive inquiry into the nature of truth and its relation to human action. Among other things, this entails that these theories inhabit a philosophical landscape that has moved beyond the dichotomy between correspondence and coherence theories of truth, or, as Davidson puts it, between realist and epistemic theories. Jürgen Habermas has gone so far as to identify Mead's approach as a paradigm shift away from the philosophy of consciousness that had dominated philosophy at least since the

Enlightenment.³² Elsewhere he recognizes Brandom's efforts in the philosophy of language on a par with John Rawls's seminal work in political philosophy.³³ Whether or not these are fair characterizations, the claim that pragmatism represents a distinct and engaging attitude toward truth is at least plausible. Furthermore, these philosophers have (arguably, at least) superceded the conflict between absolutists about truth and the skeptics who respond to them. It is this latter dichotomy that Rorty revives when he charges some versions of pragmatism with smuggling in transcendental notions.

PRAGMATISM, TRUTH, AND EDUCATION

It is easy to imagine Rorty impatient and dissatisfied with my analysis so far. Even if he could not disagree with specific arguments, we might picture him asking why we have to have this conversation at all. Even if pragmatism provides a plausible arena for inquiry into truth, is that inquiry a necessary feature of the pragmatic attitude? One simple answer (which I happen to think is true) is that these questions do not just go away because we would like to ignore them. However, I would like to answer in a more pragmatic way. That is to say, I think it is *useful* to adopt the perspective I have described, and useful in a way that Rorty's view is not.

I think it is especially productive to adopt the perspective I have developed in the field of education. There are many reasons I believe this to be the case, but two stand out as particularly compelling. First, the pragmatic attitude presents a philosophical orientation that supports a rich and effective pedagogy. Second, it offers a vision of hope regarding the potential for education to address central problems in social life. The second of these reasons would probably be claimed by Rorty for his version of pragmatism. However, it is the retention of a meaningful sense of truth, or at least the possibility of such a sense, that give substance to the hope offered by pragmatism.

Any pedagogical theory resting on the pragmatic orientation I have described would involve two sets of features. On the one hand, in all aspects of its design and functioning, it would reflect the central elements of pragmatic philosophy. Thus, to take a few examples, pragmatic pedagogy would seek to question simple dichotomies ("good student/bad student"; "academic/vocational"), be oriented toward future experience and social good, approach knowledge and learning with a fallibilistic and inquiry-based attitude, and view learning as largely a social endeavor. These concerns were raised by Dewey long ago, of course, and are being fruitfully pursued in a number of educational contexts today.³⁴ The immediate impact of recognizing the pragmatic attitude in this area, then, would be in the self-understanding of theorists and practitioners embracing it: to see oneself as working in the context of a robust engagement with truth as a meaningful concept.

On the other hand, pragmatic pedagogy would need to attend to the central features common to the theories of truth under its umbrella. Thus it would have to take seriously the belief systems, in all their various stages of development and diverse structures, that make up the worldviews of students. At the same time, these could not be construed as simple constructions, but rather would be seen as connected in important and intimate ways to a shared social experience. Meanings

might be constructed in classroom or school settings, but not out of thin air, as it were, and not in local isolation. Meanings would come out of experience, and be evaluated in terms of their influence on future experience. Furthermore, the connection between the school setting and broader social, political, and cultural groups and institutions would be emphasized. A key point here is that the pragmatic emphases on social interaction and action consequences must be maintained simultaneously. All too often, it seems, epistemological views neglect one or the other of these.³⁵

Along these lines, and in keeping with the pragmatic attitude, a positive view of the power of education would emerge. The contextual emphasis and social character of pragmatism would recognize the value and rights of diverse views, meanings, and practices. Still, the idea that meaning varies according to context and perspective would coexist with recognition of the possibility of interpretation, that is, communication across variance in meaning. Pragmatism can sustain the tension between these insights precisely due to its fallibilism and its view of meaning as fluid and intersubjectively constituted. It is capable of avoiding, at least in principle, cultural conflict for the same reasons: fallibilism demands that individuals open themselves to other viewpoints, and intersubjectivity implies that, where communication is possible, so is understanding. Thus the potential, at least, exists for “cross-cultural literacy”³⁶ through education. The result is a compelling vision of social hope and a powerful reminder of the role of education in realizing it.

As for the role of truth, it is both easily overlooked and critically important. It can be overlooked because the concept remains a vague notion, an ideal presumed but never unambiguously defined. This ambiguity, though, is a necessary companion to the open-ended nature of the pragmatic attitude, and a vital caution against the tendency, in many quarters, to identify pragmatism with a *theory* of truth, rather than an *attitude* toward it. In fact, an attractive element of this picture is that the project of educational practice can advance, even as the discussions and debates regarding truth carry on within the pragmatic framework. Yet truth is critical because the idea that it is a meaningful concept holds the project together, preventing disintegration into perspectivism, power, and conflict. Additionally, it indicates a direction and a concept of progress, even if it never quite offers a final end of human action. Finally, if nothing else, truth gives us a lot to talk about.

1. Richard Rorty, “Truth without Correspondence to Reality,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 32.

2. *Ibid.*, 28.

3. William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” *Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1948), 201.

4. This observation is made by Hilary Putnam, who also emphasizes the fallibilism of pragmatism. See Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 64.

5. Rorty, “Truth without Correspondence,” 32.

6. *Ibid.*, 35.

7. For this question, and Rorty’s version of the following discussion, see *Ibid.*, 32.

8. Charles S. Peirce, "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," *Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Vincent Tomas (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 53-54.
9. Robert Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1988): 79.
10. Donald Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
11. *Ibid.*, 280.
12. *Ibid.*, 314.
13. Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," 77-79.
14. Davidson, "Structure and Content," 281 and Putnam, *Pragmatism*, 10-11.
15. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 286.
16. See, for instance, Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
17. James, "What Pragmatism Means," *Pragmatism*, 59-61.
18. Charles Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," in *Charles S. Peirce: The Essential Writings*, ed. Edward C. Moore (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 268.
19. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*.
20. Putnam, *Pragmatism*, 21.
21. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, Vol. 12* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 142-45.
22. Dewey, *Knowing and the Known* (with Arthur Bentley) in *John Dewey: The Later Works, Vol. 16* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 108-9.
23. James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," 214.
24. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
25. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
26. Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence," 34.
27. Davidson, "Structure and Content," 325.
28. Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 115.
29. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*.
30. Mead, "A Pragmatic Theory of Truth," *Selected Writings* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).
31. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*.
32. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action: Volume Two* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 5.
33. Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language," *European Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (2000): 322-55.
34. In many places: *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944) and *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Holt, 1927) are two examples. For a more concise statement of many of these points, see "The Need for a Philosophy of Education," *John Dewey on Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Perhaps pursued most prominently in the philosophy of education by Jim Garrison. See "Deweyan Pragmatism and the Epistemology of Social Constructivism," *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 4 (1995): 716-40.
35. See Garrison, "Realism, Deweyan Pragmatism, and Educational Research," *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 1 (1994): 5-14 for an instructive example of the debates such neglect can engender.
36. See Steven F. Arvizu and Marietta Saravia-Shore, "Cross-Cultural Literacy," *Education and Urban Society* 22, no. 4 (1990): 364-76.