

When You Know It, and I Know It, What Is It We Know? Pragmatic Realism and the Epistemologically Absolute

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatism, both in popular parlance and in philosophical discourse, is often associated with a thorough-going relativism, with respect to value propositions as well as to more ordinary claims to know.

The relativistic interpretation seems to rest on the two notions: a) that a pragmatic test of the truth of a belief-statement involves, principally, the evaluation of the usefulness of that belief; and b) that the pragmatic test of whether a thing is real ultimately requires an appeal to the final beliefs of an infinite community engaged in an infinite process of inquiry. So, that which is “real” is said to be that which is represented in the views of that infinite community, and that which is “true” is identified with that which works. One might, given this interpretation, be easily led to conclude that reality is a function of human belief, and truth a function of human practice. The real and the true are thus conceived, at bottom, to be relative.

I shall argue that this view of the nature of the fundamental ontological/epistemological concepts in a pragmatic philosophy is seriously flawed. I shall do so by demonstrating that such views do not represent an accurate reading of the positions of either Peirce or Dewey, and by sketching out a consistent and, I hope, more plausible view.

Further, I shall argue that there is an epistemological consequence of the pragmatic realist position sketched, namely, that a claim such as, “when I know a thing, I know it absolutely,” turns out to be quite correct, *provided* that the claim is understood properly. The required sense emerges when one adopts a realism with respect to ontology, and combines that ontology with pragmatic interpretations in epistemology. I shall show that such a pair of positions has had a considerable role in paradigmatically pragmatic thought. To accomplish these purposes, I shall, first, sketch out the ontological realism that is associated with early philosophical pragmatism. Second, I shall sketch out a pragmatic epistemology, focusing on the traits of a proper object of knowledge. Third, I shall consider the consequences of the position for epistemological absolutism, and shall close by considering its implications for practice, specifically, for critical thinking and the teaching thereof.

WHAT, PRAGMATICALLY, IS REAL?

The ontological realism associated with the pragmatism of Pierce and Dewey springs from the observation that, despite our various specialized social contexts, we share in a fundamental commonality. And that is, we each will have had, at some point, the experience of an “obdurate reality.” We note a resistance, as the efforts made to exert our wills are at times stymied, and, moreover, stymied in what come to be rather predictable ways.

It is in exploring those patterns of resistance, in the developing of hypotheses about them, and in testing and evaluating those thinkings, that we develop, severally and communally, a complex and highly elaborated understanding, a sense of an independent reality. That resistant reality is that which sets the parameters of our non-social problem situations, and sets as well a number of the constraining parameters of our social problem situations. And in so doing, that resistant reality provides the occasion, and the motivation, for the efforts we make to think, to apprehend the real significance of things, and so to acquire knowledge.

The realism that I am speaking of here is an entirely ontological doctrine — what has been called “the boring, mundane view”¹ that material objects exist externally to us and independently of our sense experience.

The *locus classicus* for the position of pragmatic realism is Charles Sanders Peirce. This realist position enters early and explicitly into Peirce’s work, and is retained throughout. In 1905, in summarizing the basics that constitute his position, Peirce writes

Another doctrine which is involved in Pragmaticism as an essential consequence of it... is the scholastic doctrine of realism. This is usually defined as the opinion that there are real objects that are general... [including]... the modes of determination of existent singulars.²

In short, there are “existent singulars,” Peirce’s “Firsts”; there are also real relations between and among them, “Seconds”; and there are also real general laws of relation, “Thirds.”

Moreover, Peirce is explicit as to the mind-independence of the real: “That is *real* which has such and such characters, whether anybody thinks it to have those characters or not. At any rate, that is the sense in which the pragmaticist uses the word.”³

This realism is intimately related to Peirce’s epistemological positions. Consider, for example, Peirce’s argument in *The Fixation of Belief*.⁴ When we set out to establish belief, the one and only test of the “goodness” of a belief that we can have is that the belief *not* be such as would fling us precipitously, at odd moments, back into the throes of doubt. The method of establishing belief that serves us best in the project of locating stable, long-lasting (or gradually evolving) beliefs, and the only one endorsed by Peirce, is of course the method of science. And yet, at this point there arises a critical point. Note that *what* we find in science is “a method... by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some *external permanency* — by something on which our thinking has no effect,”⁵ and it is just this determination of belief by *that which is objective* that gives the method its merit.

The “permanency” of which Peirce speaks is “external” in the sense that it is not in any way affected by the thoughts that any person might have about it. Further, it is not limited in its effects to any one individual. The “permanency” in question affects *all* persons equally, although each individual is affected according to his or her particular sets of relationships to that external permanency. But, although each one of us may be “appeared to” differently, we are all “appeared to” by one thing — the Real.⁶

Thus, though what we encounter severally will inevitably be a limited selection from the “whole” of all conceivably possible experience, still the encounters that we *do have*, the interactions we each enter into, are *all* “real,” each part of experience being as “real” as the entirety. And the “reality” of the interactions consists in those interactions being just as they are, given the situation, regardless of any individual’s, or group’s, beliefs as to what those interactions are.

The crucial ontological point is that the specific interactions that constitute “things” themselves are *real*; and, similarly, the specific interactions that occur between such things and those other things we call persons are real. It is the thoroughly independent nature of what is real that gives the method of science its ability to generate, in the very long long-run, the most stable, long-lasting of all possible beliefs. The method of science does not lead, clearly, to permanent belief in the immediate present, or future; however, in a limited, and hypothetical sense, if we imagine an infinity of scientific inquiry, we can imagine the eventual understanding through that inquiry of all of reality, that is, of all existing connections and relationships. And then, at that point, we would have to imagine a permanent set of beliefs, for there would no longer be the possibility of experiences discordant with expectation, no occurrences so unexpected as to throw us into Doubt.⁷ At such a point, and this is the “down-side” of perfected Knowledge, all inquiry would necessarily cease, which is to say all thought would cease, as there would no longer be Doubt to precipitate it.

But this “final state” is, of course, purely imaginary, for the connections and interactions and real significations that constitute *reality* are infinite. Moreover, “growth” with respect to that infinite collection is never-ending. For, as Peirce notes, each perception of a connection among events is itself an event, a new interaction which itself exists and has connections and relationships of its own, which is to say, a set of inherent meanings as yet undiscovered. So, the real “meaning” of things, along with the things *per se*, is eternally developing, and the process of growth in meaning, and thus, potentially, of knowledge, is infinite.

When we scrutinize a belief, when we “test” it for potential permanence, we test it against the presently existing Reality. The method of testing is by way of scientific inquiry, that is, through the active employment of that belief to guide overt action, and a close scrutiny of the consequences of doing so. We are *not* required to test a belief against the (currently) unknown “final” views of that imaginary infinite community engaged in infinite inquiry. When Peirce asks, What is the fundamental hypothesis of the method of science which makes it work? he answers that:

There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning *how things really and truly are*.⁸

Moreover, Peirce continues, “and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it will be led to the one True conclusion.”⁹ And what is it about the method of science that allows that happy outcome? Peirce writes, “The new conception here involved is that of Reality.”¹⁰

Is there such a thing? you might be tempted to ask. Peirce entertains this question, briefly, ending, in a typically curmudgeonly Peircean style, by announcing: “not having any doubt [about the existence of mind-independent Real Things], nor believing that anybody else whom I could influence has, it would be the merest babble for me to say more about it. If there be anybody with a living doubt upon the subject, let him consider it.”¹¹

That is, for all intents and purposes the existence of that independent Reality is indeed quite satisfactorily established, in as much as there is no actual, living, genuine Doubt about the matter. The proof is that we all, invariably, as long as we live, *act* upon the supposition that there is a mind-independent external reality within which our actions must fit.

WHAT, PRAGMATICALLY, IS KNOWN?

The question to be addressed is, What *is* it that is known, when something is known? What is the “object” of knowledge? The characteristic pragmatic answer might be a bit surprising, given the emphasis just placed upon the existence of independent, objective things/events. It is *not* those things, per se, that are known; rather, it is the *connections among* the existent things that are the “objects” of knowledge.

Individual things, while not “known,” can be experienced as a set of immediately felt qualities. But it is only the interactions, both in their external connections to other things, and in the myriad interactions that go on internally, that are objects of “knowledge.” That set of potential interactions, needless to say, is infinite, and far larger than the set of things themselves, the “things” being, simply, collections of interactions.

Dewey, like Peirce, interprets the objects of knowledge and the purpose of seeking knowledge in this way, concluding that “knowledge is a perception of those connections of an object which determine its applicability in a given situation,”¹² and again, The objects of science...are an order of relations which serve as tools to effect immediate havings and beings.”¹³

Events in nature are haphazardly good, bad, or in-between, and our having any “say” in directing the course of those events depends on our having an understanding of the relations among events, both the antecedent conditions of their occurrence, and the consequent results of their occurrence. To “know” is simply to have such an understanding, and the “proper object of knowledge,” Dewey writes, is “the sequential order upon which they [the objects of appreciation] depend.”¹⁴

The objects of knowledge are, in pragmatic terms, interactions, and you learn of them by engaging in them, by taking part. In becoming aware of these interactions we come, in a literal sense, to apprehend the significance of the things, that is, we see them in their *meanings*. And those meanings must be “general” in the sense that meanings existing in the immediate present apply to what is beyond the present moment of experience. Similar things (sets of interactions) would enter into similar sorts of interactions, should a similar occasion arise — the significance is thus a general thing. A meaning of an event/thing, in this sense, is always a matter of relationship — there must be two (or more) things in connection. And, because such

relationships exist just as the participants, meanings are themselves real as much as what we normally distinguish as objects. So, meanings, the objects of knowledge, like objects themselves, are objective, independent things to be discovered, not subjective belief-dependent things to be made. And hence knowledge, the apprehension of meaning (however limited and partial that apprehension might be) is similarly an objective, belief-independent sort of thing.¹⁵

If knowledge is *of* the real connections among existents, and if the field of connections is infinite and growing, then so too is the field of knowledge. So, a “complete knowledge,” the sum total of such a series, simply cannot exist. But this does *not* mean that we cannot have knowledge right now about specific connections among immediately experienced things/events, nor is it to say that such knowledge as does now exist cannot be “absolute.”

A belief, when it counts as knowledge, must be “true.” What, then, is the pragmatic interpretation of “truth?” Note that in Peircean terms, a “belief” regarding *x* is basically an expectation regarding *x*, upon which one would be able to act anticipating certain consequences. And a “true” belief? To fully understand the concept of truth, we must, applying the pragmatic maxim, inquire as to the practical effects to be expected when the concept is applied. What, the pragmatist asks, is the significant “practical effect” that occurs when a belief regarding *x* is “true?” Simply, that that belief is one which will not be overturned, at least not permanently, by subsequent experience given ongoing genuine inquiry. But this is the practical effect, not the “definition” of truth. If one asks, *why* such a belief would not be overturned, the answer is that the belief in question identifies a “real,” as opposed to a fictional relation.

So let’s review the elements that lead from a common-sense realism to an objective theory of knowledge. Real, mind-independent things/events exist and are complexes of qualities. Such things are *not* known — only encountered, experienced. The existents are, however, ineluctably interconnected in eminently real ways. When we (who are also so inter-connected) consciously and correctly identify those connections, we come to know something. And the method we use? The identification of connections is achieved only through engaging one’s self in overt action as one (more) element of the set of interactions one seeks to know. To learn of those interactions, one hypothesizes what they might be and enters into action on the basis of that belief.

The significant point with respect to the justification of knowledge claims is that there *is* a particular “fact of the matter” to be known which remains just what it is regardless of the stance that any one might take toward it. As a consequence of this, there exists a means by which to assess and evaluate beliefs. We can potentially find warrant for our beliefs and in so doing establish strong claims to know. This is the epistemological upshot of the ontological position of realism.

What criteria must a claim of knowledge meet? What tests must it pass, before it qualifies as knowledge? In the pragmatic tradition, first, these tests are all “future-oriented.” That is, there is nothing about traits of the belief in question, not even its origination from a scientific method, that can tell us, now, on examination, whether

or not a particular belief passes muster. We can only look to the upcoming processes of using, of acting on the basis of that belief, to determine its epistemological status. Second, it is a set of real, objective, experienced effects resulting from action based on the belief that decide the issue. Dewey writes,

The experimental method “means that we have no right to call anything knowledge except where our activity has actually produced certain physical changes in things, which agree with and confirm the conception entertained. Short of such specific changes, our beliefs are only hypotheses, theories, suggestions, guesses, and are to be entertained tentatively and to be utilized as indications of experiments to be tried.”¹⁶

Should the belief, when acted upon *not* lead one to Doubt, *then*, and then only, will one be in a position to begin to judge whether that belief is a case of “knowledge.” But, one only begins, for the judgment is inductive, and the possibility always exists that future tests will produce surprising results.

THE “ABSOLUTE”-NESS OF KNOWLEDGE

If we systematically and deliberately attempt to discover any potential circumstances that might give rise to doubt, and find no cause to doubt, we make a judgment based on the argument: persistent search for cause to doubt combined with the failure to find cause to doubt is a good reason to believe, tentatively, that no such cause for doubt actually exists.

On this view, there is *no* possibility of ever attaining certainty when making the judgment that knowledge has been attained. The acceptance of a proposition as “known” remains forever a judgment, though potentially a highly validated judgment. And yet, when we are correct in that judgment, when the belief in question happens to be one that *never would* lead any one to doubt being true, (and so *is* one of those that *would* survive all future “weeding out,” making it one of the final set) then knowledge exists. And, that knowledge is not relative to the search, nor is it subjective, that is, not dependent on anything in human beliefs. It is, rather, dependent on a) real existents, and b) real nomic relationships existing among existents.

And in this sense, when and if knowledge exists, that knowledge is “absolute.” It applies, *mutatis mutandis*, across the board, in every relevantly similar problem situation, and never will be overturned, in any circumstance.

The position set out here conjoining a realist ontology with a pragmatic interpretation of both a) the nature of the objects of knowledge and b) the method by which such objects are apprehended, leads to the conclusion that knowledge is, in this sense, “absolute.” This position appears to meet the epistemological desiderata limned by Siegel in *Relativism Refuted*.¹⁷ Siegel looks toward a theory of knowledge which acknowledges and explains the existence of fallibility, which recognizes the revisability of knowledge-claims, and provides a method for achieving such revision, but which nevertheless interprets knowledge as absolute, as non-subjective non-relative claims which can be effectively tested and evaluated in non-arbitrary ways.¹⁸

The pragmatic realist achieves these desirables, but gains an additional “plus” factor. For in this view we need not settle for a set of epistemological criteria which,

while recognized as corrigible and subject to critical reassessment, are ultimately ungrounded by anything independent of human thought. In the position outlined here, we have ultimate recourse and final grounding of knowledge claims in the ontological foundation, the realism. And, we have a practicable method of performing the required tests of belief with respect to the criteria of knowledge (avoiding the problems associated with traditional “correspondence” theories of truth), and an explanation as to why those tests are adequate to the epistemological task. (Because, the object(s) of knowledge are connections, significations, meanings, of real existents, and because through systematic action involving hypothesis and observation, we discover the reliability, or lack thereof, of postulated connections.) Thus, we achieve the desideratum of “the possibility of objective, non-question-begging judgments.”¹⁹ We have, too, the ability to evaluate knowledge-claims non-arbitrarily, “on the basis of reasons which serve to (fallibly) justify their acceptance.”²⁰

This, then, is an improvement over the state of affairs we are left with in Siegel’s formulation, since the ultimate criterion is one that is “given,” that is in its nature objective, and is not determined by, nor dependent upon, human thought. And that is the “external permanency” of which Peirce speaks. Without such a grounding, although we may, and are, expected to revise and critique our existing criteria of knowledge, we have no *other* criteria to *employ* in that meta-level critique, and are inexorably required to face the hydra-like choice:

1) to evaluate, negatively, the current criteria by employing the very criteria so evaluated (a self-defeating project), or,

2) to negatively evaluate the existing criteria on the basis of some other set of criteria, a set which either:

a) has *not* itself been evaluated at all (dangerous); *or*,

b) has been evaluated by reference to the now-to-be-rejected criteria (self-defeating); *or*,

c) has been evaluated by reference to itself (circular); *or*,

2') has been evaluated by *some other* set of criteria, a set which either: (and repeat the cycle, ad infinitum...).

Without the realism, we have no way to escape this regression; without the pragmatism we have no way of using the realism to do so. Hence, it is pragmatic realism that succeeds in defeating epistemological relativism, and in establishing a conception of knowledge that is “absolute” in the desirable sense that Siegel sets out.

So, in the pragmatic realist position, the fundamental criterion of knowledge remains stable, and is independent of human belief. Moreover, the fact that the pragmatic realist view conceives evaluation of knowledge claims to be a “future-oriented” affair means that one can never fully assess the status of the belief. One is thus required, in the pragmatic realist view, to continue to dwell in an uncertain world, in which beliefs must always be held tentatively, subject to change, even as one, of necessity, acts upon them. Thus the pragmatic realist view is quintessentially non-dogmatic.

I shall conclude by drawing out a few of the implications of this theoretical position for teaching critical thinking. That there are some, I feel confident, for I take it that “critical thinking” essentially involves a search for knowledge consciously, critically undertaken. The first thing a critical thinker would require is an understanding of the nature of the object of the search, and of what that portends for the search itself.

One implication is the critical thinker must place a high value on actively engaging with discordant ideas, purposefully seeking out difference. So one values difference, but *not* “for itself,” as a positive and self-contained good; one values difference in recognition of the real value, and necessity, of the continual testing of one’s currently held hypotheses. If such challenges to one’s beliefs were not forthcoming, one would be far more likely to hold on, unawares, to settled beliefs that could have been easily “unsettled” by discourse.

For the aim, always, is to actively seek out those experiences that might lead one to Doubt, so that, after strong testing, one might judge a belief, so far, to have “passed.” The greatest good, epistemologically, that one can do for others (and vice versa) is, when occasion demands, to cordially and openly disagree. This is the measure of a “community” of inquirers — *not* that the members agree, but that they willingly engage one another in mutual *testing* of their contrary, or even contradictory, ideas. They “agree to disagree,” *not* as a way to end debate, but as the most effective way to pursue their mutual inquiry. Peirce, noting the great value that attaches to doubt, notes that the serious inquirer “is not content to ask himself whether he does doubt, but he invents a plan for attaining to doubt, elaborates it in detail, and then puts it into practice.”²¹ For only after such a process is one entitled to rely, with any confidence, on any belief.

And yet, one must recall that the goal is not merely to exchange views, not merely to “celebrate” the different views we might have; the goal, for all the participants, is to make use of the exchange to reconstruct one’s hypotheses as to *what really is the case*.

A second implication is that knowledge is only to be had through the process of active engagement of oneself within a set of interactions. Hence, the idea should grow on the critical thinking student, that knowledge *matters*, that indeed the whole point of the critical thinking is to make a difference in the real world, to affect for the better the experiences undergone. Dewey writes: “If the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator.”²²

Thus, to conclude, the realist pragmatic view leaves us with a conception of a knowledge that is absolute, but never certain and never complete, and a method of attaining to knowledge that permits the objective evaluation of conflicting claims, and yet, in so doing, demands a mutual respect for, and discourse with, fellow inquirers holding those different views. And yet there is a point to the discourse, for ultimately, there are answers which are real and objective and, because of that, are equally accessible to all.

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1. Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, 2d ed. (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1991), 13.
 2. Peirce, "Issues of Pragmatism," *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (hereinafter termed "CP"), ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934) 5.453.
 3. Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," CP 5.430.
 4. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," CP 5.358-87.
 5. *Ibid.*, CP 5.384.
 6. An existent "thing" being just a set of interactions, the difference between a "cosmos" and a "chair" is merely a matter of size and complexity.
 7. See Misak, C.J., *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), for discussion of generation of doubt via "surprising experience."
 8. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" [*italics added*] CP 5.384.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan Publications, 1944), 340.
 13. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 2d ed., (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958), 136.
 14. *Ibid.*, 149.
 15. See Thomas M. Olszewsky, "Realism and Semiosis," in *Proceedings of the C.S. Peirce Bicentennial International Congress*, ed. Kenneth L. Ketner, et al. (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1981), 87-92, for further discussion.
 16. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 338.
 17. Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987).
 18. *Ibid.*, 161.
 19. *Ibid.*, 162.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Peirce, *Issues of Pragmatism*, CP 5.451.
 22. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 338.