

PRAGMATIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Roberto Frega

The recent renewal of interest in pragmatist philosophies is part of a broader shift of philosophical focus toward the domain of practice. In many fields of philosophical inquiry, pragmatism has encouraged the development of styles of thought committed to the experimental attitude and to empirical and (often) phenomenological ways of thinking. In recent decades, an increasing number of publications have showed how pragmatist approaches might be taken in epistemology, science, technology, bioethics, law, environmental ethics, democratic theory, social and cultural studies, feminist thinking, etc. The upshot of this enormous amount of research is the evolution of a new epistemological framework. Throughout these fields, the pragmatist standpoint is acknowledged as the methodological prerequisite for taking a fresh look at human, social, and natural phenomena.

This pragmatist standpoint, though never fully condensed into a single, homogeneous framework, is typically characterized by a positive attitude toward integrating practice, by rejecting traditional dualisms, by preferring empirical over idealistic or rationalistic approaches, as well as agreement that knowledge and thinking be seen as forms of activity—as experimental inquiry. All these factors—particularly the awareness of the ineliminability of practice for understanding and explaining human, social, and natural phenomena—converge to shape a novel epistemological framework which finds its earliest expression in the work of classical American pragmatists such as O. W. Holmes, C. S. Peirce, J. Royce, W. James, J. Dewey, and G. H. Mead. A second wave of philosophers (C. I. Lewis, W. Sellars, W. O. Quine) developed and enriched these insights, while further contributions have successively been offered by what we might now call a “third wave” of pragmatism, exemplified by the works of F. Will, R. Rorty, H. Putnam, I. Levi, N. Rescher, J. Margolis, J. McDermott, and R. Bernstein, to name just a few.

Yet, as for any other wide and living movement, pragmatism’s identity has, and continues to be, contested. One need not go back to A.O. Lovejoy’s “The Thirteen Pragmatisms” (1908) to appreciate the breadth and diversity spawned by this philosophical position. Today’s proliferation of “neo” or “new” varieties of pragmatism—or at efforts to “resurge,” “renew,” “reinvent,” or “recover” pragmatism provide an adequate proof—if any were needed—of this claim’s validity. Yet pragmatism’s stunning coherence is most manifest if attention is paid to a sufficiently stable list of founding fathers, and to a stable, shared canon. In a way mostly unknown to other philosophical traditions, this back-and-forth movement is arguably a distinguishing mark of what is being done today under the label “pragmatism.” Contrary to the professionally established practice enjoining the separation of the “history of philosophy” from

“philosophy itself,” pragmatism commits itself to the inescapability of returning to historical sources to fund and frame new philosophical avenues. More than in any other philosophical tradition, in pragmatism we see this movement to be constantly at play. It is for this reason that, in order to explore the present scenarios of a pragmatist approach to epistemology, historical and theoretical approaches needed to be brought together.

This volume identifies some of the milestones of the pragmatist approach to epistemology, and contributes to a clarification of the distinctive role pragmatism is playing within this central branch of philosophy. This seems particularly necessary as the standing of pragmatism as an autonomous philosophical tradition (rather than a mere congeries of family resemblances) continues to lack adequate recognition. Articulating pragmatism as an autonomous tradition requires accomplishing three distinct goals. The first is to properly relocate pragmatism within the broader track of Western philosophy, tracing its historical evolution and signaling its points of continuity and discontinuity with traditional epistemological debates from Plato to the present. The second is to reconstruct some of the most remarkable achievements of a distinctively pragmatist epistemology rooted in the works of the early pragmatists, from the fallibilism of O. W. Holmes to the epistemology of C. I. Lewis. The third goal is to present recent and specific achievements in contemporary pragmatist epistemology.

Inquiry toward these three goals—their differences notwithstanding—exposes emerging and common themes whose intricate intertwinements produce what we are calling “pragmatist epistemology.” These themes evolve around the threefold core of *consequences*, *practice*, and *experience*. These key concepts, central to all the articles presented in this volume, are in fact at the basis of the revolution that pragmatism introduced into epistemology and which forced it to engage with the unexpected complexities and richness of ordinary experience and practices. Indeed, this was a challenge that science was already urging upon philosophy through its experimental revolution. Consequences, practice, experience, then, have very rapidly become the conceptual tools and labels through which any truly pragmatist epistemology would have to be recognized. The attention to the lived dimension of experience and of the ordinary, to the intricacies of the play of thought within agency and to the intertwinement of theory and practice is a common theme to be found across the whole pragmatist tradition. It is present in Peirce’s seminal pragmatic maxim and his associated rejection of “paper” doubt (for a more situated conception of inquiry), and extends to the most recent attempts to rethink the classical categories of truth, knowledge, and reason.

Yet the relationship of pragmatism to epistemology seems to be deeply contested. On the one side, a well established narrative states that the novelty introduced by pragmatism resides precisely in philosophy’s attempt to get rid of epistemology, since practice, experience, and the ordinary could only be recovered in this way. On the other, an increasing number of publications aim to integrate key parts of the pragmatist tradition into the canon of the analytical tradition in epistemology. In both strategies, the originality of pragmatism’s contribution to epistemology is lost. The first strategy simply dismisses the

existence and relevance of pragmatist epistemology. The second strategy fails to acknowledge the originality and distinctiveness of the pragmatist tradition, largely because its interpretations are couched in a vocabulary too full of references from a foreign philosophical framework.

This volume, in contrast, aims to show that epistemology has always been and still remains a central concern for pragmatism, but that this concern radically refashions the very concept of epistemology. As a consequence, the very project of this book might appear to some as misguided and backward looking (especially to those wishing to highlight the similarities of pragmatism to postmodernism), while others may find it inappropriate (especially those wishing to reinterpret pragmatism as a post-analytic philosophy). This first group will argue that pragmatism should simply drop epistemology, and the second group will likely claim that what is presented here is simply “not” epistemology. Such are some of the cultural and conceptual difficulties raised by the mere juxtaposition of “pragmatism” and “epistemology” as key philosophical terms. This peremptory description is meant as a caveat to those who approach this volume with expectations determined by linguistic habits drawn from other quarters of the philosophical scene.

Readers will find that the label “epistemology” as employed in this volume, in fact, does not proffer speculations dealing with the end of metaphysics, nor with the decline of rationality in the face of “emotions,” “imagination,” “power” or other anti-rational stances. Neither are the technical discussions of questions of propositional content, indexicality, justification, or truth. By acknowledging the central importance of consequences, practice, and experience in the functioning of thought and in the production of knowledge, pragmatism redefines the objects of epistemology through their insertion within socio-technical and spatio-temporal contexts. In dealing with issues of observation, experience, behavior, and agency, pragmatism remains committed to the traditional philosophical confidence in the powers of “reason,” though *this* is a reason radically rooted within the various loci of its application: from mathematical and scientific practices of discovery to ordinary and professional forms of reflective self-control. Thus, epistemology is set upon the task of explaining the place of knowledge within human agency, the emergence of reflective thinking from immediate experience, the entangling of theory with practice, and the role of reflective thinking within processes of social-control and self-control. In this way, pragmatism has brought to the philosophical fore the question of the meaning of complex processes of *fixation* of beliefs within human experience as the primary context where epistemic problems have to be located and formulated.

The overwhelming priority of the notion of inquiry and its tremendous consequences upon epistemology can be seen in Peirce’s concern for processes of learning and observation in the production of scientific and ordinary knowledge (Anderson, this volume) and for the role of gestures in mathematical thinking (Maddalena, this volume), in Dewey’s concern for experience as a methodological starting point (Hildebrand, this volume) and in Lewis’ “anomalous pragmatism” (Calcaterra, this volume). But the centrality of the category of inquiry for pragmatist epistemologies extends well beyond this

domain. We see this in some of the first inceptions of a pragmatist tradition of legal reasoning (Kellogg, this volume)—even before the official birth of pragmatism as a philosophical movement; here, we see that the idea of rationality as inquiry has become the starting point for operationalizing epistemic concepts in order to make them apt tools for exploring specific dimensions of human activities.

The conception of rationality as a process of inquiry opens the way to the peculiarly pragmatist approach to the naturalization of epistemology (or rather toward a naturalistic and yet not naturalized epistemology). Here the tension between the natural and the cultural dimensions of our epistemic performances come at its highest pitch (Margolis, this volume). Yet in the pragmatist tradition this awareness has never led to dropping the quest for objectivity but has rather issued in new ways of rejoining—and radically modifying—the long-lasting tradition of moral and metaphysical realism, duly transformed through a process of practice-relative contextualization (Pihlström, this volume). Tracing the roots of pragmatism to the historical context of the rise of Darwinism and more generally of evolutionary ways of thinking (Fabbrichesi, this volume) and assessing the philosophical relevance of a naturalistic account of inquiry as belief-fixation as an evolved trait of human behavior (Frega, this volume) also contribute important work to issues central to the agenda of contemporary pragmatist epistemologies.

Finally, we see the perhaps inevitable emergence of a tension between two kinds of pragmatism (Auxier, this volume), or, better, between two tendencies of pragmatist epistemology: the one trying to remain faithful to the anthropological and naturalistic intuition and then committed to tracking the epistemological categories to their naturalistic roots; the other trying to bring as much of this naturalistic questioning as possible within a more traditional concern for conceptual and theoretical issues. Yet the intertwinement and perhaps the inextricability of these two diverging needs is probably one of the central sources of creativity that pragmatism brings to epistemology. As a consequence, this irreducible tension between these two strands should be considered as a rather positive moment of the pragmatist philosophical conversation, a trait that, rather than splitting the tree of pragmatism in non communicating branches, operates as a generative source of innovative solutions which keeps pragmatism at the frontier of philosophical research.

In conclusion, *Pragmatist Epistemologies* contributes a reconceptualization of classical epistemological categories such as those of reason, knowledge, truth, and objectivity by examining their function in contexts of practice and experience. It is hoped that this contribution makes it more obvious how the pragmatist philosophical tradition continues to offer an enduring contribution to the understanding of our thinking and knowing nature.

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