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Who is in the Community of Inquiry?

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Abstract

A central theme of Cheryl Misak's new history is that there are two key strands in the pragmatist tradition. The Peircean strand does "justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry," she thinks, while the Jamesian strand allegedly does not. I argue that at least when it comes to philosophical inquiry, just the opposite is true. Peirce advocates adopting technical vocabulary in philosophy. But in practice, extensive use of jargon means only trained specialists can participate in inquiry. There is no assurance that consensus in such a restricted community would transcend individual and small-group bias—an important requirement for objectivity. In contrast, James's Darwinian account of inquiry requires him to practice philosophy with an audience of what he calls the "seriously inquiring amateur." A community of inquiry that includes amateurs would contain a greater variety of temperaments, James argues, and would thus be proportionately more likely to produce a consensus that transcends individual and small-group bias.

Keywords: Cheryl Misak, Charles Peirce, William James, objectivity, public philosophy, ethics of terminology.

A central theme of Cheryl Misak's important new history is that there are two markedly different strands of the pragmatist tradition. One pragmatism traces back to Peirce, she thinks, and it takes seriously the ideals of logical precision, truth, and objectivity. This tradition had its insights carried through later analytic philosophy by figures like C. I. Lewis, Quine, and Davidson, among others. The second pragmatism has its roots in James's (allegedly) more

subjectivistic outlook and after Dewey's death was revived by Good-man, Rorty, and other so-called "neo-pragmatists."

Misak recommends the Peircean strain because it is "committed to doing justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry" (Misak 2013: 3). In contrast, the Jamesian strand holds "that there is no truth at which we might aim—only agreement within a community or what works for an individual or what is found to solve a problem." (Ibid.)

I will argue that this narrative gets things backwards. It is James who does justice to objectivity and Peirce whose views have some troubling implications for this vaunted ideal. I will mainly be concerned with the prospects, on each view, for achieving objectivity in *philosophy*.[1] The issue comes down to the size of the community in which philosophical inquiry should be conducted, according to each figure. I shall argue that Peirce's views on linguistic precision require him to confine philosophical inquiry to a narrow community of trained specialists, his own protestations notwithstanding. In contrast, James's Darwinian account of inquiry requires him to practice philosophy publicly, in front of an audience of what he calls the "seriously inquiring amateur" (P 23). I will argue that inquiry conducted in a larger community with a greater variety of temperaments is proportionately more likely to produce a consensus that deserves to be called "objective," in a sense of that term that I will explain.

1. Objectivity and the Community of Inquiry

Early in her book Misak gives an intriguing hint about the *basis* for the alleged difference between Peirce and James on objectivity. Peirce's mature theory of truth holds that "a true belief is such that it would withstand doubt, were we to inquire as far as we fruitfully could into the matter." (Misak 2013: 37) She continues:

> Notice the "we" in Peirce's account of truth. He thought that truth was a matter for the community of inquirers—not for this or that individual inquirer. Since individuals have finite lives, "logicality inexorably requires that our interests shall *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community" (W 3: 284; 1878). . . . Logic is rooted in a "social principle," for investigation into what is true is not a private interest but an interest "as wide as the community can turn out to be" (CP 5. 357; 1868). With [Chauncey] Wright, Peirce thinks that inquiry must be a democratic, community project, with no prior ring-fencing of what counts as the community. (Ibid.)

That last sentence is important. On Misak's account, the prospect for achieving objectivity is supposed to differ in the two strains of pragmatism. Why? Because they differ on the *size of the communities of inquiry inside which one may justly hope to reach agreement*. James envisions

local agreements in many small communities, says Misak, while Peirce envisions one grand agreement in a single ideal community.

It is plausible that an *objective* truth is one that would be agreed to if the *widest possible community* were to push inquiry as far as it could go. Misak brings this point out nicely in her 1991 book, especially sec. 4.1. There, she teases apart several senses of objectivity she thinks Peirce's account of truth supports. One way in which Peirce's account is objective is that it treats the truth or falsity of a belief as independent of what any actual inquirer or limited group of inquirers happens to think (Misak 1991: 135). To illustrate the role of sociality in *achieving* this sort of objectivity, she cites a telling passage from Peirce, who claims that the aim of inquiry is

> to get a settlement of opinion in some conclusion which shall be independent of all individual limitations, independent of caprice, of tyranny, of accidents of situation, of initial conditions . . . a conclusion to which every man would come who should pursue the same method and push it far enough. (CP 7.316, W 3:19, 1872)[2]

On this sort of view, an objectively true belief is something like an ideally settled opinion. And an ideally settled opinion is one that does not rest on any kind of what I shall henceforth call "bias"—that is, it should not rest on the idiosyncrasies of individual sentiment or temperament, on the limitations of an individual perspective, on coercion, on contingent facts about a particular agent's current environment, or on an agent's starting-point in inquiry.

Now I take it that we can only hope to reach a consensus that approaches this ideal of bias-free objectivity if the community of inquiry is maximally diverse. Suppose one finds consensus on some opinion inside a community whose members have some high degree of varied temperaments and varied life circumstances and upbringings. That consensus will count as being proportionately objective, in the sense of being proportionately bias-free. *This* is why, for Peirce, "inquiry must be a democratic, community project, with no prior ring-fencing of what counts as the community." (Misak 2013:37)[3] In contrast, consensus among inquirers who share common biases does not deserve to be called objective.[4]

Misak concludes her book by claiming that this is precisely where Jamesian pragmatism falls short. Jamesian pragmatists

> think that there are a number of worlds, each with its own standards. Those already enrolled in a way of thinking form a community, and getting it right is a matter for that community's standards. This seems, at least on occasion, to be the pragmatism of James, Schiller, Goodman, and Rorty. The problem with this view is that it leaves us bereft of the ability to talk, agree, or disagree across communities and

bereft of the ability to adjudicate claims across those borders. It is also unclear how we could individuate communities and thus the position seems to be without protection from the idea that each of us constitutes our own epistemic community, with our own measures of what is right and wrong or true and false.

On the other side of the divide, we have those pragmatists who argue that there is but one, broad, community of inquirers, in effect agreeing and disagreeing with each other and trying to find across-the-board right answers to questions. (Ibid., 249–250)

The contrast Misak draws is this. Peirce's theory of truth supports objectivity because for him, approaching truth is a matter of approaching consensus in an ideally broad community of inquiry. James's theory threatens objectivity because (for reasons stemming from his nominalism) he cannot countenance talk about the *one* ideal community of inquiry. Instead, James can only appeal to agreement in *actual* communities, which are always limited, and always (to some extent) biased.

This leaves James in a position of having to advocate a radical form of relativism, on Misak's telling. Not only do the *truths* have to be relativized to a multitude of communities, but since the facts are just whatever the truths pick out, we literally get a corresponding multiplicity of worlds as well. What is true for me is just that to which my private community agrees, and *we* literally live in a different world from the one *you* live in. This surely seems like the height of subjectivism.

2. A Tension in Peirce's Account

To borrow a phrase, I don't think "the cakes and the butter and the syrup . . . come out so even and leave the plates so clean" (WTB 27). It's true that Peirce often *says* the community of inquiry must be as wide as possible (e.g., CP 5.311, W 2:239, 1868). But problems creep in when we try to square this ideal with an important aspect of Peirce's project that Misak skates over—his ethics of terminology.

For Peirce doesn't simply think inquiry aims at agreement in a maximally large community. He also thinks genuine inquiry—inquiry that follows the scientific method—aims at maximal *clarity*:

[T]he woof and warp of all thought and all research is symbols, and the life of thought and science is the life inherent in symbols; so that it is wrong to say that a good language is *important* to good thought, merely; for it is of the essence of it. (CP 2.220, 1903)

There is a compelling principle here: precise thought requires precise language. The main question, for Peirce, is how to *establish* such language. Precise vocabulary is only useful if it is uniformly adopted in the community of inquiry. So establishing precise language is inherently a social problem whose solution requires sociological insight.

Peirce seeks such insight in the history of science, paying special attention to long-running efforts of chemists and biologists to standardize their nomenclature.[5] The lesson he draws from this history is that a precise language is one whose key terms are *divorced* as much as possible from natural language. What makes a term precise is that it is free from ambiguity—it must have "a single exact meaning" (CP 2.222, 1903), and natural-language terms often fail this test. Univocal meaning is only possible when organized communities of specialists deliberately coin technical terminology and uniformly adopt unambiguous definitions. In short, Peirce thinks precise language must be *arcane*—its meaning must be carefully guarded by specialists.

Now, Peirce thinks philosophy is in a more precarious position than science when it comes to precise vocabulary. This is because philosophers study concepts in common use. To do so, they must *mention* thorny natural-language terms (like "truth" and "reality"). But terms of natural language are filled with ambiguity. So philosophers must take special pains to avoid *using* those terms. Instead, Peirce says that like Aristotle, the scholastics, and Kant, the wise philosopher will unabashedly embrace jargon (CP 2.223, 1903). Hence, Peirce is not merely being witty when he says that "[i]t is good economy for philosophy to provide itself with a vocabulary so outlandish that loose thinkers shall not be tempted to borrow its words." (Ibid.)

The clash with Peirce's account of objective inquiry should be apparent. It is not only "loose thinkers" who will not be tempted to borrow the arcane language of specialists—*non*-specialists will not be tempted to borrow the language either. Those uninitiated into professional scholarship simply lack the training to decipher technical vocabulary. And that means restrictions on language *inherently* restrict the size and makeup of the community of inquiry.

So Misak may be right that Peirce wants "no *prior* ring-fencing of what counts as the community" (my emphasis); but I submit that his ethics of terminology nevertheless creates a tremendous restriction on who can participate in inquiry *in practice*. And if participation in the community of inquiry is restricted to specialists, what assurance remains that a consensus among inquirers will transcend individual and small-group bias?

One might think these worries are unwarranted when it comes to disciplines like physics, chemistry, and biology. Perhaps scientific inquiry ought only to be democratic *inside* the community of properly-credentialed specialists. After all, science does not directly aim for consensus in the community at large—Richard Feynman does not have to convince crazy Uncle Harry in the course of peer-review. Still, Peirce introduces the ethics of terminology as a way to apply lessons from the sciences *to philosophy* in particular. And in philosophy, is it so obvious that crazy Uncle Harry doesn't deserve to have his voice heard?

3. William James and the Evolution of Ideas

William James once quipped that "*Technical* writing on *philosophical* subjects . . . is certainly a crime against the human race!"[6] He was deeply reluctant to employ arcane vocabulary precisely *because* he rejected ring-fencing in philosophy. And here we do find a real and lasting division in the pragmatist tradition. James's tendency to write what he called "popular philosophy"[7] was not merely a quest for intellectual celebrity or an accidental effect of his charming personality. Instead, his theory of inquiry *demanded* that he philosophize with "the seriously inquiring amateur in philosophy" (P 22). This unusually broad conception of the philosophical community bolsters the bias-free-objectivity credentials of true ideas as James conceives them. Or so I will now argue.

Like Peirce, James thinks true beliefs are those that survive inquiry.[8] One of James's favored ways to model inquiry is after the pattern of Darwinian natural selection. Individual minds spontaneously generate novel ideas, and these ideas are selected or rejected by the environment broadly construed.[9] He uses the word "verification" to refer to the interrogation of a belief in inquiry. Verification consists in an idea's being selected by the environment, and here the physical and the intellectual environment are both factors (WTB 250). The "fittest conceptions survive" (WTB 78) in virtue of fitting with both the natural world *and* with the "stock" (P 35) of ideas already accepted by the community. An idea becomes verified if and when it survives this long-term process, which we might call "idea selection."[10]

James accords *temperament* a special role in the intellectual environment and thus in idea selection. He thinks competing theories are often under-determined by "the facts of the world" (WTB 87). To settle on a belief in such cases we rely on our temperament, which "loads the evidence" (P 11) for us one way or another. If James is correct, then of two competing, empirically adequate hypotheses, the one that appeals to the broadest range of temperaments in the community is most likely to survive inquiry in the long-run (WTB 77–78, 87). Hence, James calls our temperaments the "potentest of all our premises" in philosophy (P 11).

So Jamesian verification is a kind of interrogation where we attempt to fit a new idea both to the "facts of the world" and to the intellectual environment. And the intellectual environment includes not just the stock of already-accepted beliefs but also the *temperaments* of inquirers—their various propensities for weighing the evidence this way or that all things being equal. It follows that a more rigorous interrogation involves exposing hypotheses not just to the widest possible range of "facts," *but also* to the widest possible range of *temperaments.*

The inescapable influence of temperament in inquiry (i.e., in idea selection) helps explain James's hostility towards technical philosophy,

which must be written by and for professionals. Compared to the community at large, the community of professional philosophers contains relatively little temperamental diversity, James thinks (P 11). So idea selection in an environment that consists exclusively of professionals is likely to be relatively less rigorous, in that only inquirers with a relatively narrow variety of temperaments will test out the idea.

In other words, professional philosophers typically *invent* the philosophies—they provide the novel ideas that idea selection typically acts *upon*. But for James, the environment that does the selecting must include the richly diverse multitudes of "seriously inquiring amateurs." Otherwise, we are insulating our theories from the harshest possible interrogation.

James hammers the point home:

> [A]lmost everyone has his own peculiar sense of a certain total character in the universe, and of the inadequacy fully to match it of the peculiar [technical] systems that he knows. They don't just cover HIS world. One will be too dapper, another too pedantic, a third too much of a job-lot of opinions, a fourth too morbid, and a fifth too artificial, or what not. . . . We philosophers have to reckon with such feelings on your part. In the last resort, I repeat, it will be by them that all our philosophies shall ultimately be judged. The finally victorious way of looking at things will be the most completely IMPRESSIVE way to the normal run of minds. (P 25)

Since an ultimate consensus about a philosophical system will have to satisfy the broadest range of temperaments, this consensus will have to emerge among "the normal run of minds," not merely among professional philosophers.[11] But this means that *philosophy must be written in accessible language* if it is to compete in the struggle for survival that matters—the struggle for acceptance among the "normal run of minds." Arcane discussions are simply inaccessible to the philosophical amateur. This helps explain James's predilection for popular philosophy.

Misak may wish to accuse James of subjectivism here. For his view makes the true philosophical ideas depend not just on what inquirers ultimately *think*, but on what they *feel* as well. Still, the Jamesian picture of inquiry actually has a great deal to recommend it, even if one's primary concern is objectivity.

Think of the problem Peirce runs into over objectivity. By insisting on technical vocabulary, he effectively restricts who can participate in the community of inquiry. And a consensus in a community with restricted membership is a consensus that is less likely to transcend the bias of group members. But James eschews such restrictions. For him, philosophical theories must fight for survival in the lives of inquirers who have the broadest range of temperaments and of individual biases. A theory that wins consensus after *that* kind of scrutiny has won

a victory in an unrestricted battle royale. And thus a philosophy that James's theory counts as true will have a very good claim to objectivity, indeed, because an idea that survives unrestricted *public* inquiry will have to transcend the biases of *all* individual inquirers.

An important caveat is in order: in a passage I cited at the outset, Misak mentions that James commonly writes about a multiplicity of worlds, none of which can be designated as *the* real world (e.g., P chs. 4 and 5 *passim*; PP 277). But we do well to read James's remarks on the multiplicity of worlds as referring to our ontological commitments in the here-and-now, not at the end of inquiry. If reality is just whatever the true ideas pick out, and if in the here-and-now we have yet to reach one consensus on what the true ideas *are*, then James may have to accept that there is a multiplicity of realities in the here-and-now. But we should resist reading him as predicting that there will remain a multiplicity of realities even at the ideal end of inquiry. Otherwise, I do not think we can make sense of his clear commitment to the regulative ideal that philosophical inquiry will ultimately produce *one* consensus.[12]

Still, one might think the ideal of bias-free inquiry pulls James in a different direction from his pluralism about worlds, just as it pulls Peirce in a different direction from *his* ethics of terminology. But note that their actual philosophical *practice* suggests that for James and Peirce, the scales finally tip in different directions on this issue. Whatever James *says* about the need to recognize an irreducible multiplicity of worlds, he *acts* (through his constant public engagement) as though philosophy ought ultimately to seek one consensus in a maximally broad community of inquiry. And whatever Peirce says about the need to resist restrictions on participation in the community of philosophical inquiry, he acts as though precision of thought and language is ultimately more important than a maximally-inclusive community of philosophical inquiry. Thus in the final analysis, we get a James who chooses objectivity over ontological pluralism, and a Peirce who chooses linguistic precision over objectivity.

Finally, of their many disagreements, I think the dispute between James and Peirce over the relative importance of technical language versus popular audience is among the most historically significant between these two men. For decades, skirmishes over this issue flared up among students and allies. Perhaps the decisive moment in the war came in 1929, when Morris Cohen used his APA presidential address to attack James's and Dewey's popular style (Cohen 1930).[13] Cohen's attack came just before the arrival of the first wave of logical positivists, many of whom shared Peirce's commitment to formal technique over public dialogue.

To me, what is striking about the key pragmatists Misak portrays as defenders of truth and objectivity—Peirce, C. I. Lewis, Quine, and

Davidson—is that they were *also* figures who self-consciously chose formal technique over popular discourse. And objectivity's alleged enemies—James, Dewey, and Rorty—were far more committed to public engagement. Where Misak sees a disagreement among pragmatists over the value of objectivity, I see a disagreement over restrictions on admission to the philosophical community of inquiry.

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NOTES

1. Each figure envisions a central role for philosophy in the wider ecosystem of inquiry—see, e.g., CP 5.583, 1898, and PBC 395.

2. I give the version of this passage found at W 3:19. As reproduced in CP, the passage begins "to get a settlement of opinion [that] is some conclusion which shall be . . ." (the inserted "that" was added by the CP's editors). Misak quotes this passage at 1991: 138 but with that same portion as follows: "to get a settlement of opinion, that is; some conclusion which shall be. . . ."

3. For a similar point, see Misak 1991: 80n.57.

4. The rough view of objectivity I have in mind is defended and further articulated in Longino 1990 (especially ch. 4) and 1992. Further disambiguation of various conceptions of "objectivity" can be found in Lloyd 1995, which criticizes realist readings of Peirce (readings that perhaps resemble Misak's) in section 2.3.2.

5. In his own lifetime, scientists had convened a host of congresses with the express intent of agreeing on technical vocabularies. For instance, chemists gathered at the Karlsruhe Congress of 1868 and the Geneva Congresses of 1889 and 1892. And biologists gathered at the First International Zoological Congress of 1889 in Paris, and a crucial subsequent congress in Berlin in 1901. For a helpful discussion, see Ketner 1981, especially pp. 333ff.

6. I call this a "quip" because James was actually ridiculing his own attempt (in what would become *Essays in Radical Empiricism*—see Perry 1935, II.387) to elucidate a "metaphysical system" in a technical way.

7. James's first philosophical book, *The Will to Believe*, bore the subtitle "*and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*."

8. I use "inquiry" to mean that process through which persons form settled beliefs. James claims that his pragmatic theory of truth is a generalization from an account of how individuals settle new beliefs at, for instance, P 34, 36, and 38.

9. James develops this view, for example, in "Great Men and Their Environment," an attack on Herbert Spencer's conception of social evolution.

10. James describes inquiry in terms of an environment selecting ideas in several other places as well, e.g., WTB 8–9 and MT 145. One can also find James sounding Darwinian notes in his discussion of the evolution of "common sense" categories, such as space, time, and causation, at P 83–84. Also see the concluding pages of "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," which rejects Spencer's view that true ideas are those that help the *organism* survive but

maintains that the true ideas are those that *themselves* survive inquiry in the long run (EP 20). The classic secondary discussion of pragmatism and evolutionary biology is Wiener 1949.

11. And notice James's conviction that *one* philosophical consensus will emerge in the long run. He does not say that my philosophy will ultimately be true for me and yours will be true for you. James uses this sort of language—of an "ultimate philosophy" that will emerge at the end of inquiry—elsewhere as well, e.g., WTB 65, 89.

12. See note 11, above.

13. Another defense of the Peircean line is Lovejoy 1917. For rejoinders to Lovejoy, see Albee et al. 1917. For a recent discussion of the disagreement between Lovejoy, Cohen, and Dewey on these matters, see Richardson 2002.