

Pragmatism and the Absolute: The Problem of Truth

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Introduction

Disagreement about the knowledge of truth is not new in philosophy. Greek philosophy beginning with Plato (428–348 B.C.E.) separates the real from the ideal, placing abstract, ideal forms as the end of knowledge. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), in his “Posterior Analytics,” says that “The Forms we can dispense with, for they are mere sound without sense. Even if there are such things, they are not relevant to our discussion, since demonstrations are concerned with predicates [perceptions] such as we have defined.”¹ Thus, the absolutist and rationalist views of universal truth contrast with the empirical, experience-based view. The universal or absolutist view of Truth is that nothing is *sui generis*, it is formed by reason. Whatever enters our consciousness does so in consideration of the likeness with everything else that has entered such that, logically, there must be a higher, perfect form to be validated by reason. For the absolutist and the rationalist, the source of Truth is a supreme being. God becomes the source of ultimate reality, approachable but unknowable by mortals. The counter-position, empiricism, posits that experience and applied intelligence, often in the form of the scientific method—not reason—form the basis of Truth. Pragmatism develops the empiricist view of Truth with a variety of configurations focused on the emphasis of the thinker. The American logician, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), agreeing with Aristotle’s view, says,

The abstract acknowledgment of God, Freedom, and Immortality, apart from those other religious beliefs (which cannot possibly rest on metaphysical grounds) which alone may animate this, is now seen to have no practical consequence whatever. The world is getting to think of these creatures of metaphysics, as Aristotle said of the Platonic ideas: “they are mere prattle or twitterings, and even if they exist, they are irrelevant.”²

The purpose of this paper is to identify, describe, analyze, and summarize disagreements over the place and meaning of belief, knowledge, and truth in its relation to philosophy in the early 20th century by examining

some of the available literature in which these disagreements are expressed, finally extrapolating this summary to education today.

The Absolute and the Pragmatic

Josiah Royce (1855–1916), presented the 1903 Presidential Address at the American Philosophy Association. Entitled “The Eternal and the Practical,” he writes,

There are two general tendencies of opinion which nearly all recent thinkers, whatever be their school, seem disposed to favor. The first of these tendencies is that towards a considerable, although, in different thinkers, a very varying, degree of empiricism.³

The first of these empirical tendencies was the “radical empiricism” William James (1842–1910) coins in his work, *The Will to Believe*; the second is found in *Studies in Logical Theory* by John Dewey (1849–1952) et al., and finally, the humanist philosophy of F. C. S. Schiller (1864–1937). Royce notes that the tendencies he discusses are relatively new, while the issues are old. He admits that practical considerations are important to philosophy but that these lead to a certain level of controversy. In admitting to adhering at one time to the “spirit of pragmatism—thinking, judging, reasoning, believing,”⁴ Royce opines that,

...although objects of experience seem, from a well-known realistic point of view, to be given to us whole, with all their properties and relations, as objects independent of our will ... what is directly given to us at any moment (that is, what is immediately and merely given to us) is simply the fact of our special momentary need for further insight and for further action.⁵

So the pragmatist, in Royce’s view, “has his little horde of maxims; he proclaims the truth; he refutes errors; he asserts that we ought to believe thus or so; and thus lays down the law as vigorously as do other men.”⁶ His analysis allowed him to draw several conclusions; 1. “Every judgement... is the expression of a present activity;” 2. “Judgement should be not only ours but true;” 3. Judgement should be equally true to others or in other times;” 4. Judgements are true “in concrete experience;” 5. Judgements become “mere states of mind, or stages of its experience;” 6. “We need to conceive [judgements] as partial functions of self;” and 7. Judgements of “an inclusive and invariant self ... [are] of course complete at no moment in time.”⁷ Royce concludes that,

The need for the eternal is consequently one of the deepest of all our practical needs. Herein lies the justification for pragmatism and the logical impossibility of pure pragmatism. Everything finite and temporal is practical. All that is practical borrows its truth from the Eternal.⁸

Peirce’s comments in 1871 and 1872 at The Metaphysical Club at Harvard began the development of pragmatism. The pragmatists, however,

did not form a monolithic and comprehensive philosophy. By 1905 Peirce had tried to separate himself from pragmatists coining a new term, pragmatism, for his ideas that tied more closely to his own broader concept of phaneroscopy.⁹ Other pragmatists did similarly. William James sought to fit pragmatism into his broader concept of radical empiricism, Schiller's humanism was a form of pragmatism different from Peirce's or James', and Dewey's instrumentalism developed from pragmatic underpinnings. They all had in common a mistrust of metaphysics and dogma and rejected the meaningless and incomprehensible transcendental, absolutist, idealist, and rationalistic concepts of truth and reality and their monistic and dualistic *Weltanschauungen*. Peirce's thought inspired not only new pragmatists but a host of anti-pragmatists who, from various viewpoints criticized the pragmatic conceptions of beliefs, knowledge, and truth.

Schiller was an avowed opponent of absolutist and rationalist conceptions of truth. Writing as A. Troglodyte, captive of Plato's cave, Schiller writes that he "accepts without reserve the data of modern science, and derives from them a philosophical cosmology, which can emulate the completeness of our scientific cosmogonies...[being] repelled by the fragmentariness, the unattractive form and the inconclusiveness of modern philosophy."¹⁰ He considers "any theory which puts forward an abstraction as the ultimate explanation of all things is false."¹¹ He believes that any source of truth outside of the self, experience, and science, any source that relies on, in his words, "Absolute, or the Unknowable, or the Idea, or the Will, or the Unconscious, or Matter, or Reason, the Good or the Infinite,"¹² to be unsuccessful. Schiller finds the reconciliation of science and metaphysics problematic, with metaphysics dependent on abstraction, while the scientific doctrine of methodically applies intelligence to experience.

James took the credit for establishing "pragmatism" as a movement emanating from his University of California lectures of 1898,¹³ citing Peirce as the originator of the term. James calls pragmatism "the most likely direction in which to start upon the trail of truth."¹⁴ Peirce's principles, developed in a series of essays in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1877 and 1878, are better elucidated in his Lowell Lectures given at Harvard in 1903. Indeed, in the first of his *Lectures on Pragmatism*, he admits that for the twenty years between the *Popular Science Monthly* articles and James' California lectures, pragmatism was largely ignored. After James' lecture, however, pragmatism began to be recognized as an alternative to the absolutist, idealist, and dogmatic philosophy of the 19th century's end. In 1897 James published *The Will to Believe*, in 1903 Schiller published *Humanism*, and John Dewey published *Studies in Logical Theory*. Peirce writes, "The new pragmatists seem to be distinguished for their terse, vivid and concrete style of expression together with a certain buoyance of tone as if they were conscious of carrying about them the master key to all secrets of metaphysics."¹⁵

James takes on the question of the Absolute vs. the Empirical conceptions of truth and knowledge as early as 1884, constructing what he calls (after Peirce) “common sensism,”¹⁶ though his ideas soon find that concept inadequate. His *Pragmatism* had just been published and a number of essays appeared between 1904 and 1906. These were collected in a posthumous volume, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, in 1912. These essays not only criticize the absolutist/idealist conceptions of knowledge and truth, but also describe more completely his own ideas of radical empiricism. James believed that radical empiricism included pragmatism but was more comprehensive than the pragmatic thought of the time. He, like Peirce before him, found his philosophy more complete. James seems continually astounded that absolutist/idealist philosophers did not understand that the basis of knowledge and truth is experience, that knowledge and truth are tentative and hypothetical, that unexperienceable constructs play no active role. He writes, “Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real.”¹⁷

Dewey responded to Royce and other critics of pragmatism in his 1905 Presidential Address at the American Philosophical Association, “Beliefs and Realities.” Dewey focuses on the instrumental nature of knowledge, its usefulness to individuals. Beliefs are formed from everyday experience. They serve the purpose of informing intelligent action. Dewey writes, “Beliefs look both ways: they are the original Mr. Facing-both-ways. They form and judge—either justify or condemn. ... To believe is to ascribe value, impute meaning, assign import.”¹⁸ He maintains philosophers of Royce’s ilk teach that,

...modern philosophy is, as every college senior recites, epistemology; ... [which] has the absorbed the Stoic dogma. Passionless imperturbability, absolute detachment, complete subjection to a ready-made and finished reality. ...allegiance to a reality, objective, universal, complete; made perhaps of atoms, perhaps of sensations, perhaps of logical ideas or meanings... calling it harmony, unity, totality.¹⁹

Dewey believed such teaching is entrenched in dogmatic detachment of experience from universals and in dualism, the dualism between faith and intelligence, and that the application of intelligence is thinking in the form of inquiry. Inquiry implies science, “the outcome of systematically directed inquiry... which should construe validity, objectivity, truth, and the test and system of truths, on the basis of what they actually mean and do within the inquiry activity.”²⁰ Dewey concludes that “Because the freedom of belief is ours free thought may exercise itself, and the freer it is the more sure the emancipation of belief.”²¹ Beliefs forced to conform to some pure, intellectual, or cognitive reality he rejects as useless.

Peirce’s theory of signs takes the place of the absolutist conception of the ideal and allows for a more universal understanding of experience.

He connects signs to truth through reason since “all reasoning is an interpretation of signs of some kind.”²² Signs consist of likenesses, indices, and symbols.²³ Peirce designates the highest order of sign as symbol and that “Language and all abstracted thinking, such as belongs to minds who think in words, is of the symbolic nature.”²⁴ For Peirce,

Experience is our only teacher. Far be it from me to enunciate any doctrine of a *tabula rasa*. ...there manifestly is not one drop of principle in the whole vast reservoir of established scientific theory that has sprung from any other source than the power of the human mind to originate ideas that are true.²⁵

The reasoning he notes as the adductive process of perceptual judgement, saying, “The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash.²⁶ It is an act of insight, ...the operation of adopting an explanatory hypothesis, ... [that] would account for the facts or some of them.”²⁷ Truth is then formed from the reasoned accommodation of sensory experience.

Heidelberg Kongress für Philosophie, 1908

At the Third International Congress for Philosophy, Pragmatism was an important topic. Royce (1855–1916) presented the keynote lecture to the first session on the problem of truth, where he posited the existence of absolute truth with the agreement of the overwhelming majority of those in attendance. Schiller defended the pragmatic notion in opposition to the assembly who, though they agreed on little else, opposed pragmatic philosophy. Along with Royce other American attendees, including Paul Cares (1852–1919), Chicago editor of *The Monist*, and Andrew C. Armstrong (1860–1935) of Wesleyan University in Connecticut, sided with the European philosophers in their opposition to the pragmatic philosophy of Schiller, James, and Dewey.

While Royce, the pragmatist, struggled to accommodate the instrumental and humanist means of determining truth, Royce, the idealist, maintained that knowledge is subject to error. Thus, the individual must recognize the fallible nature of truth and remain skeptical of personal knowledge, seeking instead the true relation between our ideas and experiences and the real (ideal) world. This skeptical or fallible process left possible the ideal or absolute world outside experience. In his address, Royce talks about the philosophical enterprise as “the same general issue [that] has sooner or later to be faced. ...some phase of the problem about the nature of truth.”²⁸ He discusses three motives or means for the apprehension of truth. He first describes the problems he perceives with pragmatic or instrumental thought, the continuous reconstruction of knowledge, and truth in response to experience and thinking, “which leads many of us to describe human life altogether as a more or less progressive adjustment to a natural environment.”²⁹ He thinks the “doctrines known as Instrumentalism, Humanism, and Pragmatism ... [teach that] human

opinions, judgements, ideas and beliefs are, in a word, organic functions. And truth ... is a certain value belonging to such ideas.³⁰ Thus, “true” ideas help individuals adapt to “life as human beings. ... Truth, therefore, grows with our growth, changes with our needs, and is to be estimated in accordance with our success. The result is that all truth is as relative as it is instrumental, as human as it is useful.³¹

Royce’s second motive or means for apprehending truth consists in “first rebelling against outer authority, creates its own laws.... In other cases, however it takes the form of a purely subjective idealism, confident in its own but claiming no authority. Or again, with still different results it consciously unites with its theoretical interests calls itself “Personal Idealism.” For Royce this personal idealism “makes the whole problem of truth identical with the problem of the right and freedom of the individual,”³² pitting *Lebensanschauung* against *Weltanschauung*—the personal against the universal.

Royce’s third motive arises from “our scientific, common sense...the fondness for dispassionately weighing evidence...the love of objectivity... [especially] the development of the modern critical study of the foundations of mathematics,”³³ like Boolean algebra or non-Euclidean geometry. For Royce this new system of logic results in “a new synthesis of Voluntarism and Absolutism.”³⁴ Voluntarism asserts the primacy of individual will over intellect or reason, while Absolutism allows for the existence of a reality over and above personal perception. He rejects the term Intellectualism since a synthesis of personal will and objective truth relative to personal experience and reason yields, for Royce, “an absolute voluntarism, a theory of the way in which activities must go on if they go on at all. And, as I believe, just such a theory is that which in future is to solve for us the nature of truth.”³⁵ Royce finds “the contrast between two well-known attitudes of will,—the will that is loyal to truth as an universal ideal, and the will that is concerned with its own passing caprices.”³⁶ His three motives could be synthesized, their differences minimized, when

...the trivialities of mere instrumentalism will appear as what they are,—fragmentary hints, and transient expressions, of that will whose life is universal, whose form is absolute, and whose laws are at once those of logic, of ethics, of the unity of experience, and of whatever gives sense to life.³⁷

Armstrong’s paper, “The Evolution of Pragmatism,” delivers another type of criticism of Pragmatism. He does not acknowledge Pragmatism as a philosophic system as such, relegating it instead to an evolving methodological doctrine. “Whatever else the doctrine may suggest, to whatever further conclusions it may lead or tempt,” he writes, “it proposes primarily a method of thought and inquiry—a method inherent in all thinking.”³⁸ Armstrong finds the humanism of Schiller more

comprehensive than the Pragmatism of James and Dewey. He writes that Schiller “emphasizes an inclusive view of knowledge...more hospitable than pragmatism to metaphysical conclusions.”³⁹ Armstrong finds James’ and Schiller’s theistic orientation more acceptable. Dewey, for Armstrong, relies on “truths or beliefs which have already been accepted; and reaches the conclusion such [theistic] appreciation adds nothing to the evidence on which they rest.”⁴⁰ Armstrong concludes that the changing nature of pragmatism, metaphysically and epistemologically, limits it to methodology as it lacks an appreciation for a fixed epistemology or metaphysics.

Schiller, who attended Royce’s presentation and participated in the ensuing discussion, allowed that Royce had made certain concessions to pragmatic thought but had not made clear a number of important points including: 1. The exact nature of absolute truth; 2. The false division of pragmatists into instrumentalists and individualists; and 3. The social origins of truth.⁴¹ In his own paper, “*Der Rationalistische Wahrheitsbegriff*,” Schiller comes straight to the point asking, “is there a rationalistic concept of truth at all? Is such at all conceivable?”⁴² Focusing on his humanist thinking, he writes, “the concept of truth has a consistent relationship to human life and its purposes. The research and further development of truth thus becomes one of the main means by which man keeps himself alive in the struggle for existence.”⁴³ He identifies a number of key issues: 1. The agreement of thought with its object...which seems impossible if one assumes an object independent of human thought; 2. Truth should design, represent, or imitate an image of reality, no one can compare it with its original; 3. Truth should grasp the essence of things as they are...explain how one can grasp the essence, the *an sich* of things...no one can ever know whether and how truth encompasses the inner nature of transcendent things; 4. Truth...founded on self-certainty...must...distinguish the real logical necessity of thinking...from the fake, unreliable, merely psychological; 5. One must state a formal difference between a true and false system; and, 6. One must be able to state how truth differs from error. No formal truth can suffice. The real truth we seek must fundamentally exclude error, must not leave to chance whether a statement is actually true or not, and must not easily see the wrong as a kind of truth.⁴⁴ “It follows,” says Schiller, “that the real hallmark of the truth of an assertion is the value of the consequences that the assertion leads to.”⁴⁵

In a second response to Royce’s “The Problem of Truth in Light of Recent Discussions,” “The Rationalistic Conception of Truth,” published in the 1908–1909 volume of the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Schiller took the view that rationalistic Truth is “a purely formal thing which is utterly incapable of discriminating between true and false.”⁴⁶ Reality cannot transcend human thought, cannot exist independent of the human mind. He contrasts his humanist conception of truth with the absolutist and transcendental truth of the rational idealists. “Humanism,” he writes,

“asserts ‘dependence’ and denies ‘transcendence’; Rationalism asserts ‘transcendence’ and denies ‘dependence.’”⁴⁷ God, the absolute, or an all-knower, thinks Schiller, is unnecessary to ascertaining truth which need not be present but may be psychical, not necessarily related to sensory reality. He writes, “For they include dreams, hallucinations and illusions, and the ‘objects’ of fancy, error, madness and deception. Even where the objects are ‘real’ they need not be ‘physical’ and ‘common,’ as, e.g., memories and pains and pleasures.”⁴⁸ He concludes that “theoretic truth is something it is possible to cherish as a belief only on the condition that we never behave as if we believed it.”⁴⁹ For Schiller, truth, which must remain conditional or tentative, awaiting reconstruction through further experience, requires verification.

Following papers delivered by Schiller and Armstrong, there ensued a lively debate in which participants demonstrated the continuum of ideas concerning the conception of truth. E. Dürr, Universität Bern, observed that,

The problem of truth arises from the fact that knowledge does not come about in one way, but in different ways. Certain insights are imposed on us, others that may relate to the same subject come through detours, arbitrarily, and do not have the character of unchangeability like the former.⁵⁰

A. Ruge (1881–1945), Universität Heidelberg, was concerned with the relativism resulting from experience-based truth. In his view the “logical question of truth is the question of the valid forms of reason, of the nature of reason and their relationships with the senseless.”⁵¹ V. W. Jerusalem (1854–1923), University of Vienna, and B. Jakowenko (1884–1949), Universität Freiburg, accused Schiller of not understanding the absolutist point view that “only the truth that is liberated from psychologism in every disguise (including pragmatic psychologism) is a genuinely transcendental truth.”⁵² Carus, editor of *The Monist*, ultimately summarized the absolutist and rationalist discussion saying,

Pragmatism comes from America, but, thank God, the movement has not yet taken possession of the whole country. Pragmatism is a disease that arises from the addiction to create something new and very original. But what is true about it is not new, and what is new is wrong.⁵³

He continued with the observations that Peirce no longer accepted pragmatism in its present form and that “Pierce’s renunciation of the movement is an unhappy sign of what pragmatism has become and of the pretensions it makes.”⁵⁴ Rudolf Goldscheid (1870–1931), University of Vienna, in a more conciliatory tone offered that,

...relativistic pragmatism is the necessary reaction against absolutist scholasticism, and where it loses itself to extremes,

only the extremes of scholasticism are to blame for it, which rationalism unjustly takes on so unlovingly today. Critical pragmatism certainly has the greatest future. Today we are only at the very primitive beginnings in this regard!⁵⁵

F. Kozłowski (1858–1935), University of Warsaw, questioning the equation of pragmatic truth with utility said,

It is therefore not fair to say that utility is the only criterion of truth. The truth is the harmony of our understanding with the truth; harmony but not identity. And its criterion—it is to advance science. Indeed, the truth is the ideal of reason, not its accessible and tangible goal.... We must reject the individualist and rationalist theories of truth: the former excludes science by excluding consensus; the second admitting a truth that is forever inevitable is obviously useless.⁵⁶

Finally, Schiller put the entire question to rest, at least for him. He said that the end of pragmatic and absolute truth is essentially one and the same. In his words,

...the concept of truth looks forward and not backwards. 'Absolute' truth becomes an unreached ideal. And that is actually the character of truth as we have it in science. Our truths are never final: the truth grows and increases with no foreseeable end.⁵⁷

Schiller's humanism was the basis for his consideration of the problem of truth. Not only was truth accessible through pragmatic and scientific means but also as a social construct. He continued,

...if we all freed ourselves from the illusion that we had ultimate truth: we would then no longer be so inclined to insist on our own opinion and more inclined to get along with the others. Thus, the multiplicity of truth is not a deficiency, but an excess, and recognizing this would certainly have the most beneficial effects on social life.⁵⁸

Cares, in his remarks after the papers of Schiller and Armstrong in Heidelberg, discounted James' contributions. He said,

Pierce is the only one among the pragmatists who can really think scientifically and sharply logically, the others, especially James, are quite ingenious people, writers and columnists who write like novelists, but not like real philosophers.⁵⁹

Even though James wrote *Pragmatism*, he always considered himself a "radical empiricist," but James, in response, published a collection of his essay in 1909 to respond to anti-pragmatist critics and, it seems, to deal with the frustration that intellectualist critics refused to acknowledge the value of the pragmatic viewpoint. He writes that the disagreement "over

what the word 'truth' shall be held to signify, and not over any of the facts embodied in truth situations; for both pragmatists and anti-pragmatists believe in existent objects, just as they believe in our ideas of them."⁶⁰ James describes his own perspective,

...*radical empiricism*, [as] empiricism because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification...radical because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, ...does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square. ...the world is a pluralism."⁶¹

James distinguishes between the empiricist way and the absolutist way of apprehending truth. He continues,

The absolutists...say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. To know is one thing, and to know for certain *that* we know is another.⁶²

Only through experience and reflective thinking can we allow our knowledge and opinions to grow more true though never absolutely true. "Our errors," he observes, "are surely not such awfully solemn things. ...a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf. At any rate, it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher."⁶³ The scientific process and the method of verification posits, for James, that "it is only truth as technically verified that interests [science]."⁶⁴ Other forms of truth, rational idealist, absolutist, or revealed are important only in an abstract way.

Dewey responded to the analysis of truth by Royce and others and the attacks on pragmatism in books, journals, and at the Heidelberg Kongress of 1908. In his 1910 collection of essays, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, Dewey states the case for what he calls the,

...pragmatic spirit, ...a revolt against that habit of mind which disposes of anything whatever—even so humble an affair as a new method of philosophy—by tucking it away after this fashion, in the pigeon holes of a filing cabinet...it is better to view pragmatism quite vaguely as part of a general movement of intellectual reconstruction.⁶⁵

For Dewey, reconstruction along with instrumentalism, would become a consistent stance like Peirce's signs, James' radical empiricism, and Schiller's humanism. Dewey believed that "The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomenon of life for the principle of transition [he could have said reconstruction], and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life."⁶⁶ Perhaps

Darwinism in this context serves also as a metaphor for science in general. "Were it," he continues,

... a thousand times dialectically demonstrated that life as a whole is regulated by a transcendent principle to a final inclusive goal, none the less truth and error, health and disease, good and evil, hope and fear in the concrete, would remain just what and where they now are... the new logic introduces responsibility into the intellectual life. To idealize and rationalize the universe at large is after all a confession of inability to master the courses of things that specifically concern us... Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new intentions, new problem, is the one effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the "Origin of Species."⁶⁷

Dewey calls the absolutist philosophy a "leisure class disease... [that] philosophic problems about the relation of 'the universe to moral and spiritual good' exist only in the sentimentalism that generates them."⁶⁸ Later Dewey addresses himself specifically to Royce's Heidelberg essay, accusing him of ignoring the importance of the rise of the sciences and the scientific method. Ultimately, for Dewey,

Experience, life... is social, and it exhibits this sociability nowhere more than in the continuity, the interpenetration, the reciprocal reinforcement of meanings and beliefs. Instead of an Absolute being required to substantiate this social phase of the life of intelligence it is much more probable that the Absolute is a somewhat barren and dry isolation and hypostatizing of the everyday sociality of experience.⁶⁹

Dewey later notes Royce's voluntarism, the primacy of will over intelligence, cognition over experience, which culminates in absolutism as the central tenet in Royce's philosophy. For Royce, writes Dewey,

... knowing is an act, an assertion, an acknowledging. Conjoined with them is the unfamiliar text that the active side, the voluntaristic and ethical side, is ultimate, and that no theoretical justification for it can be found.... [So] Scepticism and pessimism are but the consciousness of this clash, in recognizing that amid plurality of aims there can be no ground for one making any one supreme, and no guaranty of abiding satisfaction.⁷⁰

Dewey concludes that "Education, language and other means of communication are infinitely more important categories of knowledge than any of those exploited by absolutists.... Instrumentalism will be calling attention first, to the connection of intelligence with a genuine future, and, second, to the social constitution of personal, even of private, experience, above all of any experience that has assumed the knowledge-form."⁷¹

Continuing Debate

Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873–1962), a student of James' and Royce's at Harvard, believed that

...the pragmatism of Peirce, and of James's Berkeley address was merely a doctrine concerning the meaning of propositions, concerning the way in which the really significant issue in any controversy could be determined...[that] James, at least, in his recent book [*Pragmatism*, 1907] and elsewhere, has clearly noted this distinction between pragmatism as a theory of meaning and pragmatism as a theory of truth.⁷²

Lovejoy found pragmatism to be a

...metaphysical doctrine, which, although not always very explicitly put forward, ...to have a rather fundamental place in the characteristic mode of thought of most representative of pragmatism. This is the doctrine of the real futurity or "openness" of the future, and of the determinative or "creative" efficacy of each "present" moment in the ever-transient process of conscious judgment, choice, and action.... Such a metaphysics appears to imply the partial contingency and (from the standpoint of any "present" knowledge) indeterminateness of the future content of reality.⁷³

He identifies 13 unique types of pragmatism which he separated into four groups. Group one he designates "Pragmatist Theories of Meaning," group two, "Pragmatism as an Epistemologically Functionless Theory Concerning the Nature of Truth," group three, "Pragmatist Theories of Knowledge, i.e., of the Criterion of Validity of a Judgement," and group four, "Pragmatism as Ontological Theory."⁷⁴ Lovejoy's interest was in the history of ideas and his focus was on the precise definition of terms which, for him was not, at that time (1908), an aspect of pragmatism. This left him open to the observation that all philosophers are, at least somewhat, unique. The number of Kantians, Hegelians, Materialists, or what have you, could be examined, outlined, and classified for if philosophers have not their own unique views what are they? Max Meyer (1873–1967) read Lovejoy's essay "with astonishment, not so much because Professor Lovejoy has tried to determine the exact number of pragmatisms—there are those who try to determine the exact number of sciences; why, then, not of pragmatisms?—but because the number of pragmatisms is so exceedingly small, just a dozen and one."⁷⁵ Meyer concludes that, "Just as there are as many sciences as there are scientists, so there are as many pragmatisms as there are pragmatists.... But however great the number may be, neither science nor pragmatism is any worse off on that account."⁷⁶

The Source of the Problem for Education

The debate on the meaning of truth was a part of the more general struggles of the widening chasm developing between the philosophic tradition and the emergence of the sciences, physical, natural, and social from philosophy. Walter Lippman, in his review of *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, writes that Dewey,

...had broken with the pretensions of philosophy. Professor Dewey is really urging us to do what philosophers have always done; he has asked us, however, to put away the illusions of divinity with which they shrouded their work. That pretentiousness is the enemy. It turns human thoughts into monstrous absolutes, and takes the impossible position that some of man's thoughts are too sacred for man's criticism.⁷⁷

He says that Dewey “is urging us consciously to manufacture our philosophy...[to] make our philosophies for our own needs and purposes.”⁷⁸ From the 17th and 18th centuries, first the physical and natural sciences, then in the 19th century the social sciences, separated themselves from the philosophic paradigm to develop methods of enquiry, investigation, and verification. The search for Truth becomes a version of Zeno's paradox. We continuously approach but never quite reach the goal of ultimate knowledge. In Idealistic terms we know that Truth exists cognitively we but can never quite apprehend it. In Instrumental terms all truth and knowledge can only be held tentatively undergoing continuous reconstruction as new experiences, data, or ideas confront us.

The issue is too important to relegate to the differences between, say, Perennialism and Progressivism. After World War II the educational institution changed. The GI Bill assisted returning service personnel with vocational and higher education opportunities. The needs of these students required more than the liberal/professional education model that was prevalent in the pre-war era. The growth of higher education required adaptation to those needs. Population growth after the war put pressure on common education to similarly meet the needs of a larger and more diverse K–12 population. Schools provided diverse tracks for students; college prep, vocational/technical, and business curricula sought to meet those needs. The Sputnik era beginning in the late 1950s caused a reevaluation of the efficacy of schools. New curricula, especially in mathematics and the science, focused on improved achievement. Vocational and technical education was slowly divorced from the comprehensive high school onto separate campuses. The increasing role of technology in classrooms has changed in many ways the role of the teacher. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that responses to changing conditions are a continuing issue and that democratic society is in a constant state of change. The roles of belief, knowledge, and truth are evolving with that social change. A

pluralistic and democratic society demands choices in worldviews and those worldviews are formed in the social, educational, religious, and political institutions. The challenge to education is the question of how to approach knowledge. Is it to be transmitted as a canon of information to be acquired by students or as information to be used in continuous pursuit of Truth? Dewey opines, “Only as the schools provide an understanding of the movement and direction of social forces and an understanding of social needs and of the resources that may be used to satisfy them, will they meet the challenge of democracy.”⁷⁹ The continuing debate over the dualistic notion of a liberal education versus a practical education, an absolutist as opposed to an empirical source of truth is as important now as it was in the early 20th century.

Endnotes

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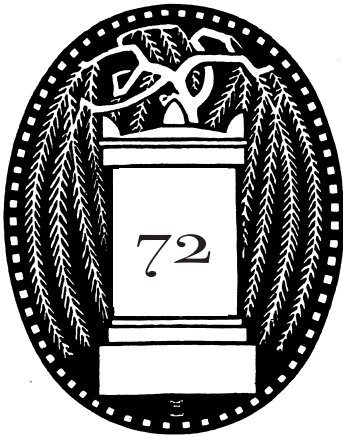
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- ²⁰ Ibid., 122–123.
- ²¹ Ibid., 129.
- ²² Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2, 4.
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- ²⁴ Ibid., 307.
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