

***'A pragmatist account of truth provides the overlooked third alternative to realism and anti-realism.'* - Does it?**

Reality can be described as “what there is” and truth consists in formulating propositions which refer correctly to reality. Looked at in this way, truth can be viewed as the way in which we align our ideas and belief to reality. A characteristic of both realists and anti-realists is to conceive of the problem of truth and reality as consisting of fixed points; the perceiver and what is perceived, subject and object. We may hold that the perceiver has views which correspond to reality, or has beliefs which cohere closely enough with each other as to constitute a true picture of reality. Rather than take this view of object and subject as being fixed points, Pragmatists, I believe take the relationship between them as being characterised by fluidity and change.

The originator of the Pragmatist viewpoint was Charles Sanders Peirce in the 19th century. His viewpoint was advanced and developed by William James and John Dewey, although they often disagreed on the application of pragmatism. James described two ways of knowing things. We could know something intuitively from direct experience, as one sees a chair that is immediately before our eyes, which he described as "an all around embracing" of the object by thought, or one could know through "an outer chain of physical or mental intermediaries connecting thought and thing," as we might know South Atlantic penguins. For James, the intuitive form of knowledge was direct apprehension, unmediated by anything, and truth for intuitive knowledge was a matter of direct consciousness in the flow of experience. For conceptual or representative knowledge, in contrast, to know that a belief was true was to "...lead to it through a context which the world supplies." . So for pragmatists, we should look to the particular practical effects of an object or theory to achieve clarity in our thoughts about it. Rather than think of a proposition as either absolutely true or false, pragmatists will consider the consequences of so designating the proposition and consider it true or false based on such considerations.

So rather than approach truth and reality through theories of correspondence and coherence, pragmatics think of truth as something flexible and subject to revision depending on whether it “works”. Rather than think of a proposition as either absolutely true or absolutely false, a pragmatist will consider the consequences of designating the proposition true or false, and

decide whether or not to consider it true based on what follows. “It is useful because it is true” has the same meaning for the pragmatist as “It is true because it is useful.”

We may notice here the “santa claus exists” argument put forward by Russell, encapsulating his objections to pragmatism.

The pragmatist “*judges a belief by its effects, whereas I judge it by its causes where a past occurrence is concerned. I consider such a belief 'true', or as nearly 'true' as we can make it, when it has a certain kind of complicated relationship (sometimes very complicated) to its causes. Dr. Dewey holds that it has 'warranted assertibility' -- which he substitutes for 'true' - if it has certain kinds of effects.*” Russell points out that an argument based on pragmatism could prove the existence of Santa Clause, because of some demonstrable beneficial effects of a belief in his existence.

However, this is unfair to pragmatism. We are not free to postulate any version of truth we please; our assessments take place in concrete experience, of either an immediate and intuitive kind, or of an intellectual kind using thought processes within the 'context which the world supplies.' The context for developing intellectual ideas includes natural laws, systems developed by preceding groups of people for describing nature, the social world, and relationships between the stream of consciousness. Intellectual kinds of experiences provide a process of verification, and become part of the process of verification for future truths, as well. It is true that we, as active agents in this truth making process, but we need to remember that we “stand on the shoulders” of our predecessors.

However, the contribution of pragmatism to the dialectic of truth and reality would need to take cognisance of the fact that it is more a theory of truth than a theory of reality. “*That opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.*” (Note: “Fate means merely that which is sure to come true, and can nohow be avoided”.) Peirce. Also; “*the reality of that which is real does depend on the real fact that the investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief in it*”

Peirce, does not have a radical and startling theory of truth to propose, and considered himself an ultra-conservative on the question of what should be called truth. he is concerned

only with an attempt to apply “*the fruitful methods of science*” to “*the barren field of metaphysics*”. Peirce applied his method for clearness to the concept of reality, he reduces reality to truth. He identifies the two. Then there remains no independent reality which stands as a check on truth. And this was the postulate of his method of science. when things partake of reality, reality exists in advance and produces those effects. Reality is conceived both as the things produced and as the producer of these things.

So reality then is judged to be the ultimate end of the search for truth. If this search ultimately converges on some fixed point, perhaps at the edge of scientific enquiry, then pragmatists do appear to be saying that there is something which could be called “reality”, albeit ever so distant from us. If they are saying that the only reality is that which arises from the truths we have, and can conceivably be modified by other truths which may be established in the process of enquiry, then they have no separate view of reality. Reality may exist for pragmatists, but it seems to become equivalent to Kantian noumena, and has no practical significance in itself. What is of practical importance is the search for it, and this process of searching becomes our reality. This I think is the great contribution of Pragmatism. It may not be the last word on the relation between truth and reality, but then Pragmatists would question the possibility of there being a “last word”.