

Introduction

Communication and Experience

In this book, I enter into a debate that has been going on at least since the publication of Richard Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism*, over whether a linguistic brand of pragmatism can articulate the central insights of the pragmatic tradition better than a type of pragmatism that takes experience as its central concept. Rorty began this debate when he argued that the classical pragmatic concept of experience is hopelessly confused and ought to be replaced by an analysis of the linguistic capacities that inform inquiry and thought in general. He claimed that the concept is confused because it falls prey to what Wilfrid Sellars calls the Myth of the Given, and that it ought to be replaced because "language' is a more suitable notion than 'experience' for saying the holistic and anti-foundationalist thing which James and Dewey wanted to say" (Rorty 1985, 40). The classical pragmatists, like Rorty, wished to overcome the modern philosophical tradition, one in which epistemology is seen as 'first philosophy'. But, Rorty argued, a view that puts experience at its center cannot enact this overcoming because the concept of experience, in being Given, is too loaded with epistemological freight from that very tradition to do the job. If their wish was to leave modern 'subject-centered' philosophy behind, the pragmatists ought to have "dropped the term 'experience'" (Rorty 1998e, 297) rather than rehabilitate it by issuing a radical empiricism. They ought to have dissolved the epistemological problematic not by trying to bridge the divide between mind and world, but by seeing knowledge as a linguistic social practice in which we are answerable to one another rather than to the world itself.¹

¹ A large literature has developed around the debate between classical pragmatism and Rortyan neo-pragmatism. See Bernstein 1992, Kloppenborg 1996, Hildebrand 2003, the papers in Hildebrand 2014, Koopman 2009, and Malachowski 2014.

Pragmatic philosophers who work in the analytical tradition and who have come after Rorty's neo-pragmatism have generally agreed with him about the theoretical importance of experience. While there have been a few contemporary analytical pragmatists for whom the concept of experience has more than an antiquarian importance, the concept has not been the center around which the contemporary analytical appropriation of the pragmatic tradition turns. As Rorty puts it, these philosophers

tend to talk about *sentences* a lot, but to say very little about ideas or experiences, as opposed to such sentential attitudes as beliefs and desires . . . Following up Sellars's criticism of the myth of the given, they do not think *anything* is "given immediately in experience" . . . In short, contemporary philosophers who profess sympathy with pragmatism show little sympathy with empiricism – they would rather forget empiricism rather than radicalize it. (Rorty 1998e, 291–292)

But while agreeing with Rorty about the concept of experience, most analytical pragmatists who have come after Rorty – those who Cheryl Misak dubbed the 'new pragmatists' – disagree with him about whether taking the 'linguistic turn' necessitates, as he thinks, rejecting the idea of objectivity – the idea that we are answerable to the world in addition to other subjects. For Rorty, notoriously, the goal of our epistemic practices is not truth, correspondence with reality, but intersubjective agreement. To think that our representations can stand "in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality" (Rorty 1991b, 21) is to accept the philosophical fantasy that we can transcend the finite and historically contingent conceptual and linguistic framework that structures our world view. To reject this fantasy is to turn "away from the very idea of human answerability to the world" (Rorty 1998d, 142–143) and accept that "there is nothing to the notion of objectivity save that of intersubjective agreement" (Rorty 1998a, 6–7). In Rorty's language, it is to replace the language of objectivity with that of solidarity. In contrast, for the new pragmatists – and here I have in mind Cheryl Misak, Hilary Putnam, Jeffrey Stout, Bjørn Ramberg, Michael Williams, Huw Price, Robert Brandom, and Donald Davidson – any satisfactory pragmatic position must engage the question of how thought is constrained by and answerable to the world, in addition to other subjects.² While the new pragmatists agree with Rorty's 'humanist' notion

² We could also mention Susan Haack and Isaac Levi here. Misak claims that there are other thinkers that could be thought of as new pragmatists even though they do not see themselves as part of the pragmatic tradition. She references Simon Blackburn, John McDowell, and Crispin Wright. For wide readings of the pragmatic tradition that include such figures, see Bernstein 1995, 2010, and

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that the world by itself cannot dictate to us what we should think about it, they “are united in their efforts to articulate a position that tries to do justice to the objective dimension of *human inquiry*” (Misak 2007, 1).³

I agree with the sentiment expressed by the new pragmatists that Rorty’s neo-pragmatism is flawed because it does not accommodate a pragmatically reconstructed notion of objectivity. This book aims to articulate a pragmatic position that includes such a notion. Where I diverge from the new pragmatists concerns the strategy one must use to rehabilitate this concept.⁴ Whereas most new pragmatists think that objectivity is best rehabilitated solely in *communicative-theoretic* terms – i.e., in terms that can be cashed out exclusively by capacities that agents gain through taking part in linguistic communication – I argue that rehabilitation can best be achieved through *experiential-theoretic* means.⁵ In other words, I take it that to achieve the aims of the new pragmatists, we need to do more than see objectivity as a norm of rationality embedded in our social-linguistic practices, in the so-called game of giving and asking for reasons; we also need to see it as emergent from our experiential interaction with the world. In this way, my argument is an attempt to redeem and reactualize for contemporary philosophy a key insight developed by the classical pragmatists, especially James and Dewey.⁶

In making this argument, I do not mean to suggest that linguistic communication has *no* importance for answering the question of objectivity. For, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 6, linguistic communication is necessary to articulate an important stratum of the concept of objectivity, and it plays a key role *within* the pragmatist account of experience. What I argue instead is that any account that thinks that an

Brandom 2011a. It should be noted that there are other very important pragmatists who, while not strictly speaking analytical philosophers, took the linguistic turn – i.e., Jürgen Habermas and Richard J. Bernstein. Both take it that pragmatism’s account of instrumental reason must be supplemented with accounts of communicative reason, imported via speech acts theory or Gadamerian hermeneutics. In recent years, both have come to stress more strongly the importance of experience in the classical pragmatist’s sense. See Habermas 2003 and Bernstein 2010.

³ For an analysis of the relation of the new pragmatists to the pragmatic tradition as a whole, see Bernstein 2007.

⁴ I adopt the language of “rehabilitation” from McDowell 2000a.

⁵ I say “most new pragmatists” because not all of them eschew experience. Here I am thinking of Putnam and Misak. While not focused on the term ‘experience’, Putnam came to think that the account of the mind–world relation at work in the pragmatists (especially James) and other allied thinkers (Austin and McDowell) is central to overcoming the antinomies that beset modern philosophy. See Putnam 1990b, 1998, and 1999. Misak argues that pragmatists need both language and experience in their picture if they are to make sense of objectivity. See Misak 2014.

⁶ I do not mean to suggest that Peirce did not think experience to be important. He did. But he did not take it to be a central object of investigation as James and Dewey did.

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analysis of linguistic communication is by itself sufficient to rehabilitate objectivity cannot succeed.

The Two Pragmatisms

My claim is that an account of experience akin to that of James and Dewey is necessary to make sense of objectivity. This goes against the standard interpretation of these authors, which argues that they are not wholeheartedly committed to this ideal. For instance, in her recent book *The American Pragmatists*, Misak develops the idea that pragmatic tradition includes two distinct kinds of pragmatism: one represented by Chauncey Wright, Peirce, C. I. Lewis, and Sellars; the other represented by James, Dewey, and Rorty.⁷ Although she recognizes that there is substantial overlap between these kinds of pragmatism, the first “tries to retain a place for objectivity and for our aspiration to get things right while the other is not nearly so committed to that.” She goes on to say:

On the one side of the debate we have Richard Rorty and his classical predecessors (James and Dewey) holding 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 . . . On the other side of the divide, we have those who think of pragmatism as rejecting an ahistorical, transcendental, or metaphysical theory of truth, but nonetheless being committed to doing justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry – to the fact that those engaged in deliberation and investigation take themselves to be aiming at getting things right, avoiding mistakes, and improving their beliefs and theories. On this more objective kind of pragmatism, which emanates from Wright and Peirce, the fact that our inquiries are historically situated does not entail that they lack objectivity. (Misak 2013, 3)

I do not deny that there are reasons for breaking up intellectual space in this way, especially if one focuses, as Misak does, on truth. I agree with Misak that James and Dewey (and, of course, Rorty) do not do justice to the fact that truth is a distinct norm of thought and inquiry that cannot be reduced to what works (in the way of our thinking), nor to warranted belief. Although I do not think that Misak does justice to the complexities of James’s or Dewey’s theories of truth, one can agree with her that James sometimes leaves the reader with a sense that he thinks that truth is what is satisfying for me or for you and that Dewey sometimes seems

⁷ See Mounce 1997 for a similar ‘two-pragmatist’ reading of the pragmatic tradition.

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to suggest that a true idea is one that is warranted due to its merely solving a local problem.⁸

But the objectivity question operates at two levels for the pragmatist –⁹ at the epistemic level and at the level of content – and truth does not play the same role at each level.¹⁰ At the epistemic level, the question of objectivity concerns the question of how our *inquiries* must be structured so as to issue in judgments that can be counted as *knowledge*. At this level, which is the one that is usually discussed with respect to the pragmatists, one is concerned with how inquiry, though value laden, fallible, and without foundations, can nonetheless get things right. It can, so the thought goes, because inquiry is a self-correcting enterprise, the authority of which is determined solely by evidence and open, unconstrained reason giving by a community of inquirers. At the level of content, in contrast, the question of objectivity concerns how potentially knowledge-bearing thoughts or judgments can have *objective content* – i.e., can be rationally constrained by and answerable to the mind-independent world. Here the question is how the world can stand as the *norm* for the correctness of thought and judgment about it.

Before going on, it is important to point out that for the classical pragmatists, the second question is not completely independent of the first because, on their view, thought or judgment is rationally answerable to the world by being part of an inquiry-like structure – namely, a feedback governed cycle of perception, thought, and action in which reflective problem solving informs our bodily habits and skills and in which these bodily habits and skills prepare us for intelligent future practice. This cycle is inquiry-like in the sense that the patterns of the disciplined forms of inquiry that come to be developed in the modern sciences are implicit in, and are a development of, this anthropologically basic way of coping with the world. But, nonetheless, an answer to the second question will have a different emphasis than an answer to the first, having to do not with the correct procedures for getting objective knowledge, but with

⁸ For more nuanced accounts of their theories of truth see Burke 1994 and Putnam 1997.

⁹ Like Rorty, I sometimes in this book talk about ‘the pragmatist’ or ‘the pragmatists’. Sometimes I use these terms in a very general sense to refer to all of the classical pragmatists. But more often, I, unlike Rorty, use them to denote those who take experience to be the central concept of the pragmatic tradition.

¹⁰ In positing these two levels, I follow Rouse 2015, chapter 5. Objectivity, of course, has many other meanings, but these are the two that are germane for the argument of this book. I give a brief pragmatic account of ‘ontological objectivity’ in Levine 2017.

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the way that subjects and their cognitive abilities are situated within, and constrained by, the environment.

The debate about truth between the two kinds of pragmatism almost always concerns the epistemological level of objectivity. It is at this level that Misak's claim that one needs an account of truth to make sense of objectivity has purchase. To illustrate, let us take Dewey and Peirce as our avatars of the two kinds of pragmatism. For Dewey, thought and judgment are epistemically objective because they are a product of a self-correcting enterprise that involves communication and reason giving between inquirers who have the right *virtues* of inquiry. Dewey names three central virtues: 'whole-heartedness', 'open-mindedness', and 'intellectual responsibility'. Dewey takes it that inquiry cannot be a-perspectival – a procedure that maximally abstracts from an inquirer's subjective endowments, as realists about epistemic objectivity like Nagel and William hold, because inquiry requires that one *cares* about, is *devoted* to, and is *interested* in one's object.¹¹ Without these evaluative and affective states, inquiry would not get very far. But whole-heartedness is not equivalent to having a succession of affective states, for "it requires consistency, continuity, and community of purpose and effort" (LW 7, 256).¹² So these states must, to constitute the virtue of whole-heartedness, fund the correct *habits* of attention such that one can focus on the object of one's inquiry in an undistracted and single-minded way. To be open-minded, in contrast, is to have the "active desire to listen to more sides than one; to give heed to facts from whatever source they come; to give full attention to alternative possibilities; to recognize the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us" (LW 8, 136). So open-mindedness is the virtue that opens us to being sensitive to evidence and other points of view and attentive to the fact that the correctness or incorrectness of our beliefs is determined by the evidence rather than our preestablished opinion. Lastly, to be intellectually responsible, one must "consider the consequences of a projected step . . . to be willing to adopt these consequences when they follow reasonably from any position already taken. Intellectual responsibility secures integrity; that is to say, consistency and harmony in belief" (LW 8, 138). Here, one learns to submit one's thinking to the logical and material entailments of the beliefs one has taken on and to accept responsibility for these entailments.

¹¹ See Tiles 1988, chapter 5, for a comparison of Dewey and William's views.

¹² With the exception of the *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Dewey 2007) and his 1897 Lectures on Hegel (Dewey 2010), references to Dewey are to *The Collected Works of John Dewey 1882–1953* (Early Works, Middle Works, and Late Works). *The Early Works* are abbreviated EW, the *Middle Works* MW, and the *Late Works* LW.

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Peirce does not disagree that virtues such as these are necessary for correct inquiry; but he thinks that these virtues, to be effective, need to be connected internally to the *hope* for a belief that *would* continue to meet the aims of inquiry in the face of continued inquiry and reason giving – which is what a true belief is for Peirce.¹³ Dewey, in his later work, accepts this conditional account of truth. “The best definition of *truth* from the logical standpoint which is known to me is that of Peirce . . . ‘Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief’” (LW 12, 343n). But it is true that for Dewey this logical conception does very little work in his thought. Dewey worried that focusing on it would divert our attention away from the methods by which our various inquiries actually fix belief and tempt us into reinstating a realist view of truth. But I think he had another worry. In his moral philosophy, Dewey argued that happiness is not “directly an *end* of desire and effort, in the sense of an end-in-view purposively sought for, but is rather an end-product, a necessary accompaniment, of the character which is interested in objects that are enduring and intrinsically related to an outgoing and expansive nature” (LW 7, 198). To make happiness one’s direct end is the surest way to not achieve it, for then one does not cultivate a *genuine* and *direct* interest in the kinds of objects that will, in fact, make one happy. I think he has the same thought about truth: instead of focusing on truth itself, we should – in light of our cultivated interests and habits – directly plunge into the objects of our concern. It is this that will produce truth, but as a by-product of, or accompaniment to, an inquiry that looks into objects in the right way.

Misak claims that the marks of epistemic objectivity are these: “We aim to get things right, we distinguish between thinking that one is right and being right, we criticize the beliefs, actions, and cognitive skills of others, we think that we can make discoveries and that we can improve our judgment” (Misak 2000, 77).¹⁴ It is not clear to me that Dewey’s view of truth as a by-product rather than an end-in-view makes him incapable of doing justice to these marks. Open-mindedness and intellectual

¹³ Misak argues, I think correctly, that this definition of truth is preferable to Peirce’s more famous account of truth as the belief that an infinitely expanding community of inquirers would endorse at the end of inquiry. It is preferable because it avoids several serious problems to which the latter is subject, for instance, that inquiry can stop before the end of inquiry and that it seems impossible for us in the present to specify the conditions that will obtain at the end of inquiry. See Misak 2000 and 2004. See Habermas 2000 for other difficulties with the end of inquiry view of truth.

¹⁴ In this passage, Misak is arguing that moral discourse can be objective. But the marks she identifies are general features of objectivity in all domains.

responsibility together involve an appreciation of the distinction between being right and merely thinking that one is right, and of the need to criticize and appraise reasons. And the virtue of whole-heartedness involves devotion to the object of one's inquiry, which entails a belief that we can make discoveries and improve our thought. I think it is clear that Dewey *was* interested in our getting things right, although not in our fetishizing our conclusions as having gotten things right (for this certainly 'blocks the way of inquiry'). Our getting things right will be a by-product of correct inquiry rather than its direct aim. Nonetheless, I agree with Misak that Dewey gets something wrong here. For, in my view, to inquire into something correctly by having the right virtues of inquiry *just is* to be aiming at getting beliefs that we would have no reason to revise – i.e., true beliefs. Take the virtue of open-mindedness, in which we learn to be sensitive to the evidence and the possibility of our being out of alignment with it. This virtue would seem to depend on the fact that the inquirer is looking for beliefs that not only are in alignment with the evidence but ones that *would continue* to be such. If this is so, then truth is not merely a by-product of inquiry but is internally connected to it.

But while this book at certain points takes up the issue of epistemic objectivity, it is primarily about objectivity at the level of content. Here, the question is how potentially knowledge-bearing thoughts or judgments can have contents that are rationally answerable to the mind-independent world. Here, truth is not germane in the same way.

For traditional versions of the correspondence theory of truth, the account of truth *does* determine one's account of the objectivity of content. According to this theory, a thought or judgment is true if and only if it corresponds to the facts. Whether a thought or judgment corresponds to the facts is an objective affair that is settled independently of what you, I, or anyone thinks. Truth is evidence and inquiry transcendent. But if this is the case, then if one grasps what it is for a thought or judgment to be true, which is what for a truth-theoretic semantics determines its content, then one also grasps that *what* one's thought or judgment corresponds to is independent of what you, I, or anyone thinks. For the correspondence theory, the concept of objectivity comes, as it were, for free. But this is not so for those who reject the traditional correspondence theory and the truth-theoretic accounts of content that depend on it, as all pragmatists do. If one thinks that the content of the concepts that comprise thought or judgment are not conferred directly through word–world correspondence relations, but rather through their role in judgments that themselves have a functional role in a subject's goal-directed cognitive system, then the

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question of whether the content these concepts articulate correctly answer to the object this content is purportedly about becomes an open one. One needs a positive account of the objectivity of content over and above an account of truth.

Misak, predictably, argues that James and Dewey can't give a positive account of this concept of objectivity either:

One kind of pragmatism thinks that our history and evolution makes us into the interpretive engines we are and, although we cannot completely pry apart interpretation from the truth of the matter, there nonetheless is a matter that we are interpreting. That is Peirce, and we shall see, C. I. Lewis. The other kind of pragmatism thinks that not even by abstraction can we say that there is something that stands apart from our interpretation of it. That is Dewey and, in a different sort of way, James and Schiller. (Misak 2013, 116)

For Misak, the question here is not one directly about truth, but about whether one can avoid idealism by developing an account of thought or judgment in which it is constrained by something that stands apart from it. For all of the pragmatists, this is a difficult question because they think that our access to the world is always mediated – by signs, concepts, habits, purposes, and interests. For this reason we can never, as Misak says, *completely* pry apart the matter interpreted from our interpretation of it.¹⁵ To think that we can is to fall prey to what Sellars calls the Myth of the Categorical Given, the myth that the intrinsic nature of things is directly revealed to us simply through being Given, prior to our learning to use concepts, signs, etc.¹⁶ In light of this, Misak's claim becomes the following: Peirce, Lewis, and Sellars can, without falling prey to the Myth of the Given, account for the fact that thought is constrained by and answerable to something that stands apart from it, while James, Dewey – and, of course, Rorty – cannot.

I aim, in the course of this book, to demonstrate that Misak's claim is wrong. In the first part of the book, I argue that certain new pragmatists that Misak thinks of as part of the Peircean line of pragmatism – i.e., Brandom and Davidson – cannot, in fact, account for objectivity.¹⁷ They cannot because their views are predicated on the same move that underlies Rorty's position – namely, the rejection of experience. In the second part

¹⁵ The language of interpretation is C. I. Lewis'. When the sensory given is taken in a certain way by conceptual judgment one 'interprets' the given.

¹⁶ See Sellars 1981, 11.

¹⁷ See Misak 2013, 248 and 253 for her readings of Brandom and Davidson as part of this pragmatist line.

of the book, in contrast, I argue that James and Dewey ought not to be grouped with Rorty because they, while not falling prey to the Myth of the Given, retain a robust place for the objectivity of content in their thought.

Two Concepts of Experience

One way to express the central thought of this book is this: for a pragmatist to have a satisfactory account of the objectivity of content, an account of how thought is rationally constrained by and answerable to the world, he or she must be a type of empiricist. In this, I agree with John McDowell, who had done more than anyone else in contemporary philosophy to emphasize this point. In *Mind and World*, McDowell articulates what he calls a ‘minimal empiricism’, a view in which experience serves as a ‘tribunal for our thinking’. If empirical thinking is to be correct or incorrect depending on whether it answers to how things are in the world, and if our way of getting in touch with the world unavoidably involves experience, then our thinking – if it is to be in touch with the world – must in some way be answerable to experience. If thought is to be objective, of the way things genuinely are, it must be objective by way of a consideration of our experiential encounter with the world.

I agree with McDowell when he argues, on the basis of his minimal empiricism, that Rorty, Brandom, and Davidson can’t make sense of the objectivity of thought because they eschew experience. Indeed, in the first part of this book, I cash out this thought in great detail. But my grounds for making this point are different than McDowell’s. This is because I argue, in the second part of the book, that to articulate the connection between objectivity, thought, and experience correctly, we need to go beyond the account of experience found in McDowell’s minimal empiricism to the more radical accounts of experience found in the pragmatic tradition.¹⁸

¹⁸ In chapter 1 of his book *The Pragmatic Turn*, Richard Bernstein argues that the pragmatic tradition is best seen in light of the question about mind and world identified by McDowell rather than in terms of the theory of meaning articulated by Peirce in his 1878 *Illustrations of the Logic of Science* papers, and taken over and transformed by James in his pragmatism. Bernstein makes this interpretive move by reminding us of the importance of Peirce’s 1868–1869 *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* Cognition Series papers (where Peirce’s anti-Cartesian program is first laid out) and by showing us that Peirce’s theory of perception can make sense of the fact that it involves both ‘secondness’ and ‘thirdness’ without falling prey to the Myth of the Given. See Bernstein 1964 for the origin of this interpretive strategy. My book follows Bernstein’s interpretive reorientation, but it focuses on James and Dewey rather than Peirce. This entails that certain aspects of the theory of meaning downplayed by Bernstein must be included as part of a pragmatist answer to the problems surrounding the relation of mind and world identified by McDowell.