

2. Truth without Correspondence to Reality

(1994)

Pragmatism is often said to be a distinctively American philosophy. Sometimes this is said in tones of contempt, as it was by Bertrand Russell. Russell meant that pragmatism is a shallow philosophy, suitable for an immature country. Sometimes, however, it is said in praise, by people who suggest that it would be un-American, and thus immoral, not to be a pragmatist – for to oppose pragmatism is to oppose the democratic way of life.

Although I think that Russell's contempt for both pragmatism and America was unjustified, I also think that this sort of praise of pragmatism is misguided. Philosophy and politics are not that tightly linked. There will always be room for a lot of philosophical disagreement between people who share the same politics, and for diametrically opposed political views among philosophers of the same school. In particular, there is no reason why a fascist could not be a pragmatist, in the sense of agreeing with pretty much everything Dewey said about the nature of truth, knowledge, rationality and morality. Nietzsche would have agreed with Dewey against Plato and Kant on all these specifically philosophical topics. Had they debated, the *only* substantial disagreement between Nietzsche and Dewey would have been about the value of egalitarian ideas, ideas of human brotherhood and sisterhood, and thus about the value of democracy.

It is unfortunate, I think, that many people hope for a tighter link between philosophy and politics than there is or can be. In particular, people on the left keep hoping for a philosophical view which cannot be used by the political right, one which will lend itself only to good causes.¹ But there never will be such a view; any philosophical view is a tool which can be used by many different hands. Just as you

cannot learn much about the value of Heidegger's views on truth and rationality from the fact that he was a Nazi, so you cannot learn much about the value of Dewey's (quite similar)² views on the same subjects from the fact that he was a lifelong fighter for good, leftist political causes, nor from the fact that he shared Walt Whitman's sense that 'the United States are themselves the greatest poem'. Your opinion of pragmatism can, and should, be independent of your opinion of either democracy or America.

For all that, Dewey was not entirely wrong when he called pragmatism 'the philosophy of democracy'. What he had in mind is that both pragmatism and America are expressions of a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind. I think the most one can do by way of linking up pragmatism with America is to say that both the country and its most distinguished philosopher suggest that we can, in politics, substitute *hope* for the sort of knowledge which philosophers have usually tried to attain. America has always been a future-oriented country, a country which delights in the fact that it invented itself in the relatively recent past.

In what follows, I shall be arguing that it helps understand the pragmatists to think of them as saying that the distinction between the past and the future can substitute for all the old philosophical distinctions – the ones which Derrideans call 'the binary oppositions of Western metaphysics'. The most important of these oppositions is that between reality and appearance. Others include the distinctions between the unconditioned and the conditioned, the absolute and the relative, and the properly moral as opposed to the merely prudent.

As I shall be using the term 'pragmatism', the paradigmatic pragmatists are John Dewey and Donald Davidson. But I shall be talking mostly about Dewey, and will bring in Davidson only occasionally (to help out in the clinches, so to speak). It is customary to distinguish the 'classical pragmatists' – Peirce, James and Dewey – from such living 'neopragmatists' as Quine, Goodman, Putnam and Davidson. The break between the two is the so-called 'linguistic turn'. This was the turn philosophers took when, dropping the topic of experience and picking up that of language, they began taking their cue from Frege

rather than from Locke. In the US, this turn was taken only in the 1940s and 1950s, and it was as a result of this turn that James and Dewey ceased to be read in American philosophical departments.

When people try to associate Americanism and pragmatism, it is usually only the classical pragmatists whom they have in mind. The so-called neopragmatists do not concern themselves much with moral and social philosophy, nor do they see themselves as representing anything distinctively American. As a student of Carnap, Quine was taught that philosophy should stay close to logic, and keep its distance from politics, literature and history. Quine's students, Goodman and Davidson, take this Carnapian view for granted. Of the neopragmatists I have listed, only Putnam has, in his later writings, stepped beyond the limits Carnap set.

Of the three classical pragmatists, only James and Dewey deliberately and self-consciously related their philosophical doctrines to the country of which they were prominent citizens. Peirce thought of himself as part of an international community of inquirers, working on technical and specialized problems which had little to do with historical developments or national cultures.³ When he referred to political issues and social trends, it was in the same left-handed way in which Quine refers to them – as topics which have little to do with philosophy.

James and Dewey, however, took America seriously; both reflected on the world-historical significance of their country. Both were influenced by Emerson's evolutionary sense of history, and in particular by his seminal essay on 'The American Scholar'. This essay rejoices in the difference between the Old World and the New, and Oliver Wendell Holmes called it 'our national Declaration of Intellectual Independence'. Both men threw themselves into political movements – especially anti-imperialist movements – designed to keep America true to itself, to keep it from falling back into bad old European ways. Both used the word 'democracy' – and the quasi-synonymous word 'America' – as Whitman had: as names of something sacred. In an essay of 1911, Dewey wrote:

Emerson, Walt Whitman and Maeterlinck are thus far, perhaps, the only men who have been habitually, and, as it were,

instinctively aware that democracy is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature . . .⁴

As Cornel West has made clear,⁵ one needs to have read some Emerson in order to understand the source of the 'instinctive awareness' which James and Dewey shared. West says that Emerson

associates a mythic self with the very content and character of America. His individualism pertains not simply to discrete individuals but, more important, to a normative and exhortative conception of the individual *as* America. His ideological projection of the first new nation is in terms of a mythic self . . . a heroic American Scholar, one who has appropriated God-like power and might and has acquired the confidence to use this power and might for 'the conversion of the world'.⁶

At bottom, however, Emerson, like his disciple Nietzsche, was not a philosopher of democracy but of private self-creation, of what he called 'the infinitude of the private man'. Godlike power was never far from Emerson's mind. His America was not so much a community of fellow citizens as a clearing in which Godlike heroes could act out self-written dramas.

In contrast, Whitman's tone, like James's and Dewey's, is more secular and more communal than Emerson's. So perhaps the best way to grasp the attitude towards America which James and Dewey took for granted, and shared with the audiences who heard their lectures, is to reread Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, written in 1867. That book opens by saying:

As the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom, the same present the greatest lessons also in New World politics and progress . . .

America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including feudalism (as indeed, the present is but the legitimate birth of the past, including feudalism) counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the

future . . . For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come.⁷

In this essay I shall focus on Whitman's phrase 'counts . . . for her justification and success . . . almost entirely upon the future'. As I see it, the link between Whitmanesque Americanism and pragmatist philosophy – both classical and 'neo-' – is a willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for. If there is anything distinctive about pragmatism it is that it substitutes the notion of a better human future for the notions of 'reality', 'reason' and 'nature'. One may say of pragmatism what Novalis said of Romanticism, that it is 'the apotheosis of the future'.

As I read Dewey, what he somewhat awkwardly called 'a new metaphysic of man's relation to nature', was a generalization of the moral of Darwinian biology. The only justification of a mutation, biological or cultural, is its contribution to the existence of a more complex and interesting species somewhere in the future. Justification is always justification from the point of view of the survivors, the victors; there is no point of view more exalted than theirs to assume. This is the truth in the ideas that might makes right and that justice is the interest of the stronger. But these ideas are misleading when they are construed metaphysically, as an assertion that the present status quo, or the victorious side in some current war, stand in some privileged relation to the way things really are. So 'metaphysic' was an unfortunate word to use in describing this generalized Darwinism which is democracy. For that word is associated with an attempt to replace appearance by reality.

Pragmatists – both classical and 'neo-' – do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance–reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, they have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. When they are asked, 'Better by what criterion?', they have no detailed answer, any more than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs. Pragmatists can only say something as vague as:

Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad. When asked, 'And what exactly do you consider good?', pragmatists can only say, with Whitman, 'variety and freedom', or, with Dewey, 'growth'. 'Growth itself,' Dewey said, 'is the only moral end.'⁸

They are limited to such fuzzy and unhelpful answers because what they hope is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology, but rather that the future will astonish and exhilarate. Just as fans of the avant garde go to art galleries wanting to be astonished rather than hoping to have any particular expectation fulfilled, so the finite and anthropomorphic deity celebrated by James, and later by A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, hopes to be surprised and delighted by the latest product of evolution, both biological and cultural. Asking for pragmatism's blueprint of the future is like asking Whitman to sketch what lies at the end of that illimitable democratic vista. The vista, not the endpoint, matters.

So if Whitman and Dewey have anything interesting in common, it is their principled and deliberate fuzziness. For principled fuzziness is the American way of doing what Heidegger called 'getting beyond metaphysics'. As Heidegger uses it, 'metaphysics' is the search for something clear and distinct, something fully present. That means something that does not trail off into an indefinite future, something like what Aristotle called 'the now', *to nun*, a *nunc stans*, a plenitude of present being. Heidegger thought of pragmatism as part of such a search, and thereby got it completely backwards. He thought of Americanism as the reduction of the world to raw material, and of the reduction of thinking to planning, and of pragmatism as the juvenile 'American interpretation of Americanism'.⁹ That reduction was the exact opposite of his own attempt to sing a new song. But Heidegger never read Whitman's new song. Had he done so, he might conceivably have come to see America as Hegel (if only briefly) did: as the further westering of the spirit, the next evolutionary stage beyond Europe.

If one thinks of the metaphysics of presence as the metaphysics of Europe, then one can see the contrast between this metaphysics and the 'new metaphysic' which is democracy as the contrast between old

Europe and new America. Just as Mark Twain was convinced that everything bad in European life and society could be corrected by adopting the American attitudes and customs which his Connecticut Yankee brought to King Arthur's Court, so Dewey was convinced that everything that was wrong with traditional European philosophy was the result of clinging to a world picture which arose within, and met the needs of, an egalitarian society. He saw all the baneful dualisms of the philosophical tradition as remnants and figurations of the social division between contemplators and doers, between a leisure class and a productive class.¹⁰ He explains the origin of philosophy as the attempt to reconcile 'the two kinds of mental product' – the products of the priests and the poets with those of the artisans.¹¹ Such reconciliation is needed when the myths and customs of the society can no longer be taken on faith, but must be defended by the sort of causal reasoning which artisans use to explain why things are to be done in one way rather than in another.

Dewey argues that so far the thrust of philosophy has been conservative; it has typically been on the side of the leisure class, favouring stability over change. Philosophy has been an attempt to lend the past the prestige of the eternal. 'The leading theme of the classic philosophy of Europe,' he says, has been to make metaphysics 'a substitute for custom as the source and guarantor of higher moral and social values'.¹² Dewey wanted to shift attention from the eternal to the future, and to do so by making philosophy an instrument of change rather than of conservation, thereby making it American rather than European. He hoped to do so by denying – as Heidegger was to deny later on – that philosophy is a form of knowledge. This means denying that there is or could be an extra-cultural foundation for custom, and acknowledging openly that, 'In philosophy, "reality" is a term of value or choice'.¹³ He wanted to get rid of what he called 'the notion, which has ruled philosophy ever since the time of the Greeks, that the office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real, rather than, as is the case with our practical judgments, to gain the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise'.¹⁴ In saying that democracy is a 'metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature', he is saying that the institutions of a truly

nonfeudal society would produce, and be produced by, a nondualistic way of thinking about reality and knowledge. This way of thinking would, for the first time, put the intellectuals at the service of the productive class rather than the leisure class. Pragmatism would, for the first time, treat theory as an aid to practice, rather than seeing practice as a degradation of theory.

If all this sounds vaguely reminiscent of Marx, that is because both Marx and Dewey were steeped in Hegel, and because both rejected everything nonhistoricist in Hegel, especially his idealism. They also rejected his preference for understanding the world rather than changing it. Both kept only those parts of Hegel which could easily be reconciled with Darwin. Dewey described Hegel as 'a triumph in material content of the modern secular and positivistic spirit . . . an invitation to the human subject to mastery of what is already contained in the here and now of the world . . .'.¹⁵ He viewed Darwin and Hegel as two aspects of a single antidualistic movement of thought – a movement which, by rejecting the essence–accident distinction and blurring the line between spirit and matter, emphasized continuity over disjunction, and production of the novel over contemplation of the eternal.¹⁶

Habermas has said that Marx, Kierkegaard and American pragmatism were the three productive responses to Hegel, and that pragmatism was 'the social-democratic branch of Young Hegelianism'.¹⁷ The effect of Hegel on both Marx and Dewey was to switch attention from the Kantian question, 'What are the ahistorical conditions of possibility?' to the question, 'How can we make the present into a richer future?' But whereas Marx thought that he could see the shape of world history as a whole, and could see the present as a transitional stage between feudalism and communism, Dewey was content to say that the present was a transitional stage to something which might, with luck, be unimaginably better.

When, rather late in life, he eventually got around to reading Marx, Dewey concluded that Marx had been taken in by the bad, Greek, side of Hegel – the side which insisted on necessary laws of history. He saw Marx, Comte and Spencer as having succumbed to the lure of a pseudoscience which could extrapolate from the present to the future. He concluded that

Marxism is 'dated' in the matter of its claims to be peculiarly scientific. For just as *necessity* and search for a *single* all-comprehensive law was typical of the intellectual atmosphere of the forties of the last century, so *probability* and *pluralism* are the characteristics of the present state of science.¹⁸

This view of Marx is reminiscent of Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* and also of E. P. Thompson's anti-Althusserian polemic *The Poverty of Theory*. Of the two, however, Dewey is much closer to Thompson, whose *Making of the English Working Class* he would have read with enthusiasm and delight. Had he read Popper, he would have applauded Popper's fallibilism while deploring the dualisms which Popper, like Carnap, took for granted. For the logical empiricist movement, of which Carnap and Popper were representatives – the movement which was to shove pragmatism brusquely aside, in American departments of philosophy, after the Second World War – reinvented the sharp Kantian distinctions between fact and value, and between science on the one hand and ideology, metaphysics and religion on the other. These were distinctions which both James and Dewey had done their best to blur. The logical empiricists had, with the help of Frege and Russell, linguistified all the old Kantian distinctions which Dewey thought Hegel had helped us to overcome. The history of the re-dissolution of those distinctions by the neopragmatists, under the leadership of Quine, is the story of the re-pragmatization – and thus the de-Kantianizing and the re-Hegelianizing – of American philosophy.¹⁹

So far I have been trying to give an overview of Dewey's place in the intellectual scheme of things by saying something about his relation to Emerson, Whitman, Kant, Hegel and Marx. Now I want to become a bit more technical, and to offer an interpretation of the most famous pragmatist doctrine – the pragmatist theory of truth. I want to show how this doctrine fits into a more general programme: that of replacing Greek and Kantian dualisms between permanent structure and transitory content with the distinction between the past and the future. I shall try to show how the things which James and Dewey said about

truth were a way of replacing the task of justifying past custom and tradition by reference to unchanging structure with the task of replacing an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future, thus replacing certainty with hope. This replacement would, they thought, amount to Americanizing philosophy. For they agreed with Whitman that America is the country which counts for its 'reason and justification' upon the future, and *only* upon the future.

Truth is what is supposed to distinguish knowledge from well-grounded opinion – from justified belief.²⁰ But if the true is, as James said, 'the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable, reasons',²¹ then it is not clear in what respects a true belief is supposed to differ from one which is merely justified. So pragmatists are often said to confuse truth, which is absolute and eternal, with justification, which is transitory because relative to an audience.

Pragmatists have responded to this criticism in two principal ways. Some, like Peirce, James and Putnam, have said that we can retain an absolute sense of 'true' by identifying it with 'justification in the ideal situation' – the situation which Peirce called 'the end of inquiry'. Others, like Dewey (and, I have argued, Davidson),²² have suggested that there is little to be said about truth, and that philosophers should explicitly and self-consciously *confine* themselves to justification, to what Dewey called 'warranted assertibility'.

I prefer the latter strategy. Despite the efforts of Putnam and Habermas to clarify the notion of 'ideal epistemic situation', that notion seems to me no more useful than that of 'correspondence to reality', or any of the other notions which philosophers have used to provide an interesting gloss on the word 'true'. Furthermore, I think that any 'absoluteness' which is supposedly ensured by appeal to such notions is equally well ensured if, with Davidson, we insist that human belief cannot swing free of the nonhuman environment and that, as Davidson insists, most of our beliefs (most of *anybody's* beliefs) must be true.²³ For this insistence gives us everything we wanted to get from 'realism' without invoking the slogan that 'the real and the true are "independent of our beliefs"' – a slogan which, Davidson rightly says, it is futile either to accept or to reject.²⁴

Davidson's claim that a truth theory for a natural language is nothing more or less than an empirical explanation of the causal relations which hold between features of the environment and the holding true of sentences, seems to me all the guarantee we need that we are, always and everywhere, 'in touch with the world'. If we have such a guarantee, then we have all the insurance we need against 'relativism' and 'arbitrariness'. For Davidson tells us that we can never be more arbitrary than the world lets us be. So even if there is no Way the World Is, even if there is no such thing as 'the intrinsic nature of reality', there are still causal pressures. These pressures will be described in different ways at different times and for different purposes, but they are pressures none the less.

The claim that 'pragmatism is unable to account for the absoluteness of truth' confuses two demands: the demand that we explain the relation between the world and our claims to have true beliefs and the specifically epistemological demand either for present certainty or for a path guaranteed to lead to certainty, if only in the infinitely distant future. The first demand is traditionally met by saying that our beliefs are made true by the world, and that they correspond to the way things are. Davidson denies both claims. He and Dewey agree that we should give up the idea that knowledge is an attempt to *represent* reality. Rather, we should view inquiry as a way of using reality. So the relation between our truth claims and the rest of the world is causal rather than representational. It causes us to hold beliefs, and we continue to hold the beliefs which prove to be reliable guides to getting what we want. Goodman is right to say that there is no one Way the World Is, and so no one way it is to be accurately represented. But there are lots of ways to act so as to realize human hopes of happiness. The attainment of such happiness is not something distinct from the attainment of justified belief; rather, the latter is a special case of the former.

Pragmatists realize that this way of thinking about knowledge and truth makes certainty unlikely. But they think that the quest for certainty – even as a long-term goal – is an attempt to escape from the world. So they interpret the usual hostile reactions to their treatment of truth as an expression of resentment, resentment at being deprived

of something which earlier philosophers had mistakenly promised. Dewey urges that the quest for certainty be replaced with the demand for imagination – that philosophy should stop trying to provide reassurance and instead encourage what Emerson called ‘self-reliance’. To encourage self-reliance, in this sense, is to encourage the willingness to turn one’s back both on the past and on the attempt of ‘the classical philosophy of Europe’ to ground the past in the eternal. It is to attempt Emersonian self-creation on a communal scale. To say that one should replace knowledge by hope is to say much the same thing: that one should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one’s present beliefs. As West says, ‘For Emerson, the goal of activity is not simply domination, but also provocation; the telos of movement and flux is not solely mastery, but also stimulation.’²⁵

In the context of post-Kantian academic philosophy, replacing knowledge by hope means something quite specific. It means giving up the Kantian idea that there is something called ‘the nature of human knowledge’ or ‘the scope and limits of human knowledge’ or ‘the human epistemic situation’ for philosophers to study and describe. A recent book by Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, makes clear how much can be gained by giving up this idea. For, once we drop it, we shall not be able to make sense of Descartes’ claim that the fact that we might be dreaming casts doubt on all our knowledge of the external world. This is because we shall recognize no such thing as ‘our knowledge of the external world’, nor any such order as ‘the natural order of reasons’ – an order which, for example, starts with the ‘deliverances of the senses’ and works up from there in the time-honoured manner imagined by empiricists from Locke to Quine. These two notions are interlocked since, as Williams says, ‘the threat of scepticism is indissolubly linked to a foundational conception of knowledge’²⁶ and that conception is indissolubly linked to that of context-free justification. To give up the idea of context-free justification is to give up the idea of ‘knowledge’ as a suitable object of study – the idea which Descartes and Kant inherited from Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

Once one has said, as Plato did in that dialogue, that *S* knows that *p* is true if and only if *p* is true, and if *S* both believes that *p* and is justified in believing that *p*, there is nothing epistemological to be said *unless* one can find something general and interesting to say either about justification or about truth. Philosophers have hoped to find something interesting to say about both by finding some connection between the two – thereby linking the temporal with the eternal, the transitory human subject with what is there *anyway*, whether there are humans around or not.²⁷ That can be done if philosophy can show that the better justified a belief is, the more likely it is to be true. Failing that, it might try to show that a certain procedure for justifying belief is more likely to lead to truth than some other procedure. Dewey hoped to show that there was such a procedure; Davidson, and more pragmatists, seem to me right in suggesting that there is not.

As I see the history of pragmatism, there are two great differences between the classical pragmatists and the neopragmatists. The first I have already mentioned: it is the difference between talking about ‘experience’, as James and Dewey did, and talking about ‘language’, as Quine and Davidson do. The second is the difference between assuming that there is something called ‘the scientific method’, whose employment increases the likelihood of one’s beliefs being true, and tacitly abandoning this assumption. Peirce, in his essay on ‘The Fixation of Belief’, one of the founding documents of pragmatism, tried to describe what he called ‘the method of science’.²⁸ Dewey and his students, notably Hook, insisted on the importance of this method. That insistence was the principal area of overlap between Deweyan pragmatism and the logical empiricism which briefly replaced it in American philosophy departments. But as American philosophy moved into its postpositivistic stage, less and less was heard about the scientific method, and about the distinction between science and nonscience.

That distinction was undermined by the most influential English language philosophical treatise of the past half-century: Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962. Although Kuhn did not explicitly attack the notion of ‘scientific method’ (as Feyerabend later did), the effect of his book was to let that notion quietly fade away. It

has been helped to do so by Davidson's insistence that truth is the same thing in physics and ethics, and by Putnam's polemics against the scientism which Carnap taught him. From within the non-representationalist picture of knowledge common to Davidson and Dewey, there is no easy way to reconstruct the distinction between science and nonscience in terms of a difference in *method*.²⁹ Everything that has happened in philosophy of language since Quine makes it difficult to reconstruct the foundationalist assumptions which are required to take the notion of 'method' seriously. I have urged elsewhere that all that remains of Peirce's, Dewey's and Popper's praise of science is praise of certain moral virtues – those of an open society – rather than any specifically epistemic strategy.³⁰

As I see the present situation of pragmatism, postpositivistic analytic philosophy has made it clearer to us than it was to Peirce and Dewey that we should no longer try to follow up on the *Theaetetus* by trying to find something interesting to say about the connection between justification and truth. We should agree with William James on just the point on which he differed from Peirce and Dewey, namely that science and religion are *both* respectable paths for acquiring respectable beliefs, albeit beliefs which are good for quite different purposes. What we have learned, principally from Kuhn and from Davidson, is that there is nothing like Descartes' 'natural order of reasons' to be followed when we justify beliefs. There is no activity called 'knowing' which has a nature to be discovered, and at which natural scientists are particularly skilled. There is simply the process of justifying beliefs to audiences. None of these audiences is closer to nature, or a better representative of some ahistorical ideal of rationality, than any other. The idea of a subject of study called 'rationality' goes at the same time, and for the same reasons, as the idea of a subject of study called 'knowledge'.

A Dewey who had let himself be persuaded by James to give up on scientism and methodolatry could agree with Davidson that there is nothing to be said about truth of the sort epistemologists want said. Once one has said, with Peirce, that beliefs are rules of action rather than attempts to represent reality, and, with Davidson, that 'belief is in its nature veridical',³¹ one can take the moral of naturalism to be

that knowledge is not a natural kind needing study and description, rather than that we must provide a naturalized epistemology. Such a reformed Dewey could also have welcomed Davidson's point that truth is not an epistemic concept.³² This point entails, among other things, that no interesting connection will ever be found between the concept of truth and the concept of justification.³³ The only connection between these two notions is that, for the same reason that most beliefs are true, most beliefs are justified.

For, a believer who is (unlike a child or a psychotic) a fully fledged member of her community will always be able to produce justification for most of her beliefs – justification which meets the demands of that community. There is, however, no reason to think that the beliefs she is best able to justify are those which are most likely to be true, nor that those she is least able to justify are those which are most likely to be false. The fact that most beliefs are justified is, like the fact that most beliefs are true, merely one more consequence of the holistic character of belief-ascription. That, in turn, is a consequence of the fact that beliefs which are expressed as meaningful sentences necessarily have lots of predictable inferential connections with lots of other meaningful sentences.³⁴ We cannot, no matter how hard we try, continue to hold a belief which we have tried, and conspicuously failed, to weave together with our other beliefs into a justificatory web. No matter how much I want to believe an unjustifiable belief, I cannot will myself into doing so. The best I can do is distract my own attention from the question of why I hold certain beliefs. For most matters of common concern, however, my community will insist that I attend to this question. So such distraction is only feasible for private obsessions, such as my conviction that some day my lucky number will win the jackpot.

It may seem strange to say that there is no connection between justification and truth. This is because we are inclined to say that truth is the aim of inquiry. But I think we pragmatists must grasp the nettle and say that this claim is either empty or false. Inquiry and justification have lots of mutual aims, but they do not have an overarching aim called truth. Inquiry and justification are activities we language-users cannot help engaging in; we do not need a goal called 'truth' to help us do so, any more than our digestive organs need a goal called health

to set them to work. Language-users can no more help justifying their beliefs and desires to one another than stomachs can help grinding up foodstuffs. The agenda for our digestive organs is set by the particular foodstuffs being processed, and the agenda for our justifying activity is provided by the diverse beliefs and desires we encounter in our fellow language-users. There would only be a 'higher' aim of inquiry called 'truth' if there were such a thing as *ultimate* justification – justification before God, or before the tribunal of reason, as opposed to any merely finite human audience.

But, given a Darwinian picture of the world, there can be no such tribunal. For such a tribunal would have to envisage all the alternatives to a given belief, and know everything that was relevant to criticism of every such alternative. Such a tribunal would have to have what Putnam calls a 'God's eye view' – a view which took in not only every feature of the world as described in a given set of terms, but that feature under every other possible description as well. For if it did not, there would remain the possibility that it was as fallible as the tribunal which sat in judgment on Galileo, a tribunal which we condemn for having required justification of new beliefs in old terms. If Darwin is right, we can no more make sense of the idea of such a tribunal than we can make sense of the idea that biological evolution has an aim. Biological evolution produces ever new species, and cultural evolution produces ever new audiences, but there is no such thing as the species which evolution has in view, nor any such thing as the 'aim of inquiry'.

To sum up, my reply to the claim that pragmatists confuse truth and justification is to turn this charge against those who make it. They are the ones who are confused, because they think of truth as something towards which we are moving, something we get closer to the more justification we have. By contrast, pragmatists think that there are a lot of detailed things to be said about justification to any given audience, but nothing to be said about justification in general. That is why there is nothing general to be said about the nature or limits of human knowledge, nor anything to be said about a connection between justification and truth. There is nothing to be said on the latter subject not because truth is atemporal and justification temporal, but because

the *only* point in contrasting the true with the merely justified is to contrast a possible future with the actual present.

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NOTES

1 Otto Neurath is reputed to have said that 'no one can use logical empiricism to ground a totalitarian argument', and certainly the members of the Vienna Circle, like many contemporary writers, saw Heidegger's philosophy and Hitler's politics as bound up with each other. But one should remember that no one can use logical empiricism, or pragmatism, to ground an *antitotalitarian* argument. No argumentative roads from epistemological or semantic premises will take one to political conclusions, any more than to conclusions about the relative value of literary works. But it is nevertheless obvious why those who favour a pragmatist account of the nature of human knowledge tend to admire Whitman and Jefferson more than they do Baudelaire or Hitler.

2 For a discussion of the similarities between the Heidegger of *Being and Time* and pragmatism, see Mark Okrent, *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988). For an attempt to relate the same elements in Heidegger to Davidson's work, see the final chapter of J. E. Malpas, *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3 Peirce had little use for Emerson, but in his later period, when he was developing a 'metaphysics of evolutionary love', he confessed that though he was 'not conscious of having contracted any of that virus' of 'Concord transcendentalism', it was probable that 'some benignant form of the disease was implanted in my soul unawares' (C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Hartshorne and Weiss, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. VI, section 102).

4 John Dewey, 'Matterlinck's Philosophy of Life' in *The Middle Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), vol. VI.

5 See West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), ch. i. West explains his title, which refers to Emerson's having set aside the Cartesian problematic which had dominated European philosophy, at p. 36.

6 West, pp. 12–13.

7 Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), p. 929.

8 John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy, The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. XII, p. 181.

9 “‘Americanism’ is something European. It is an as-yet-uncomprehended species of the gigantic, the gigantic that is itself inchoate and does not as yet originate at all out of the complete and gathered metaphysical essence of the modern age. The American interpretation of Americanism by means of pragmatism still remains outside the metaphysical realm’ (Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’ in William Lovitt, ed. and trans., *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 15. There is some reason to think that Heidegger’s knowledge of pragmatism was confined to the material presented in the dissertation of Edouard Baumgarten, a Heidegger student who had studied with Dewey.

10 See Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty, The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. IV, ch. i, for a clear statement of this claim. Dewey says, for example, ‘Work has been onerous, toilsome, associated with a primeval curse . . . On account of the unpleasantness of practical activity, as much of it as possible has been put upon slaves and serfs. Thus the social dishonor in which this class was held was extended to the work they do. There is also the age-long association of knowing and thinking with immaterial and spiritual principles, and of the arts, of all practical activity in doing and making, with matter . . . The disrepute which has attended the thought of material things in comparison with immaterial thought has been transferred to everything associated with practice’ (p. 4). Later he says, ‘If one looks at the foundations of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle as an anthropologist looks at his material, it is clear that these philosophies were systematizations in rational terms of the content of Greek religious and artistic beliefs. The systematization involved a purification . . . Thus, along with the elimination of myths and grosser superstitions, there were set up the ideals of science and of a life of reason . . . But with all our gratitude for these enduring gifts, we cannot forget the conditions which attended them. For they brought with them the idea of a higher realm of fixed reality of which alone true science is possible and of an inferior world of changing things with which experience and practical matters are concerned . . .’ (p. 14).

11 See Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 86.

12 Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 89.

13 Dewey, ‘Philosophy and Democracy’, *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. XI, p. 45.

14 Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 14.

15 Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 51.

16 For more on this topic, see my ‘Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin’ included in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

17 See Peter Dews, ed., *Habermas: Autonomy and Solidarity* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 151.

18 Dewey, *Freedom and Culture, The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. XIII, p. 123.

19 I have sketched a version of this story in my *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and have discussed the attempt by Sidney Hook (Dewey’s favourite, and most gifted, student) to reconcile pragmatism with logical empiricism in my ‘Pragmatism without Method’ (included in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)).

20 For present purposes I can neglect the so-called ‘fourth condition of knowledge’ proposed by Edmund Gettier – that a belief be brought about in appropriate ways, in addition to being held, justified and true.

21 William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 43.

22 Davidson has said that ‘true’ should be taken as transparently clear, and as primitive and indefinable. In my writings on Davidson, I have interpreted this to mean that Davidson agreed with Dewey that there is little for philosophers to say about truth. Davidson repudiated this interpretation, and the suggestion that he was a ‘disquotationalist’ about truth, in his ‘The Structure and Content of Truth’ (*Journal of Philosophy* (June, 1990), vol. 87, p. 288; see also p. 302). In his recent *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), J. E. Malpas cites this repudiation of my interpretation, and suggests that it shows what is wrong with my repeated attempts to add Davidson to the list of contemporary neopragmatists. (See Malpas, p. 357, and ch. 7 *passim*.) The heart of Davidson’s claim that there is more to be said about truth than Tarski says, and that truth is an explanatory concept (my argument to the contrary in ‘Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth’

notwithstanding), is that 'a theory of truth [for a given natural language, such as English or French] is a theory for describing, explaining, understanding, and predicting a basic aspect of verbal behavior' ('Structure and Content', p. 313). This fact, Davidson continues, shows that 'truth is a crucially important explanatory concept'.

My response is that the fact that an empirical theory which correlates verbal behaviour with situation and environment, as well as with the linguistic behaviour of the person propounding the theory (thus ensuring the 'triangulation' of speaker, hearer and environment which Davidson describes as 'the ultimate source of both objectivity and communication' (p. 325)) is genuinely explanatory does not mean that the concept of truth is genuinely explanatory. Calling such a theory a 'theory of truth' rather than a 'theory of meaning' or, simply, 'a theory of the linguistic behaviour of a certain group', does not show what Malpas calls the 'centrality' of the concept of truth. It merely shows the need to possess such a theory in order to make effective use of *any* semantic concept. See, on this point, Davidson's indifference, in his 1967 essay 'Truth and Meaning' to the question of whether a theory which generates the T-sentences for a language L is to be called 'a theory of meaning' or 'a theory of truth' (*Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 24). In that essay, the question of what a theory which produces the relevant T-sentences is a theory *of* is treated as of negligible importance – as I think it in fact is. So when Davidson ends 'Structure and Content' by saying, 'The conceptual underpinning of interpretation is a theory of truth', I wish that he had said instead, 'The explanation of our ability to interpret is our ability to triangulate' and let it go at that.

Be that as it may, all that matters for my version of pragmatism, and my claim that there is less to be said about truth than philosophers have traditionally thought, is a point on which Davidson, Malpas and I heartily concur: that, as Davidson puts it, 'We should not say that truth is correspondence, coherence, warranted assertability, ideally justified assertability, what is accepted in the conversation of the right people, what science will end up maintaining, what explains the convergence on single theories in science, or the success of our ordinary beliefs. To the extent that realism and antirealism depend on one or another of these views of truth we should refuse to endorse either' ('Structure and Content', p. 309).

23 See Davidson's 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (in *Truth*

and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)) for his argument for this claim. Despite Malpas's strictures (cited in the previous note), and Davidson's refusal to call himself a pragmatist on the ground that it is definatory of pragmatism to define truth as warranted assertability, I still think it fruitful to see Davidson as carrying through on the classical pragmatists' project. One justification for describing him in these terms can be gleaned from Robert Brandom's 'Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk' (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 12, pp. 75–94). There Brandom suggests that we think of the basic insight of the classical pragmatists as what he calls 'phenomenalism' about truth – defined as the denial 'that there is more to the phenomenon of truth than the proprieties of such takings [i.e., of holding true, treating as true, etc.]' (p. 77). If one substitutes 'than the sort of explanation of the proprieties of such takings provided by an empirical T-theory for a language', then Davidson too counts as 'phenomenalist' in the relevant sense.

24 See Davidson, 'Structure and Content', p. 305. I regret that Malpas resuscitates the term 'realism' to describe Davidson's (and Heidegger's) view at the conclusion of his book (pp. 276–7). As Malpas says, this is not the sense of the term 'used by Nagel, Putnam or Dummett'. I think it is needlessly confusing to invent a new sense to fit Davidson and Heidegger. I would prefer something like 'anti-scepticism' or 'anti-Cartesianism' to designate the inescapability of *in-der-Welt-sein* affirmed by both philosophers. For what is involved is not a positive thesis, but simply the abjuration of a particular picture which has held us captive – the picture I have called (in the introduction to my *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*) 'representationalism', and which Michael Williams (whose work I discuss below) calls 'epistemological realism'.

25 West, p. 26.

26 Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. xx.

27 The phrase 'what is there anyway' is Bernard Williams' way of explicating what he calls 'the absolute notion of reality' – a notion which the pragmatists did their best to get rid of.

28 His description of this method in that essay of 1877 is foundationalist in spirit, and not easy to reconcile with the antifoundationalism of the 1868 essays 'Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man' and 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities'.

29 This is not to say that the notion of 'methods of reaching truth' has gone altogether out of fashion within contemporary analytic philosophy. On the contrary, there is a flourishing movement called 'naturalistic epistemology' (a term of Quine's), which sets its face against the pragmatism of Kuhn's approach to science, and tries to rehabilitate the notion of 'method'. It is able to do so, however, only because it takes a representationalist account of knowledge for granted.

The aims and assumptions of this movement are well set out in Philip Kitcher's 'The Naturalists Return', *Philosophical Review* (January 1992) vol. 101, pp. 53–114, an article which ends by seeing naturalized epistemology as needed to counteract the baleful influence of people like Feyerabend and myself. Kitcher says that, 'Traditional naturalism finds an objective standard for epistemological principles by seeing the project of inquiry as one which cognitively limited beings, set in the actual world, seek a particular kind of representation of that world. Given the nature of the world, of the beings in question, and the kind of representation that is sought, there will be determinate answers to questions about how it is best to proceed, and hence an objective epistemological standard' (p. 101). At p. 93 Kitcher deplores Kuhnian accounts which make the history of science 'resemble a random walk' rather than 'an undirectional progress', and at p. 96 he deplores the way in which 'radical naturalists' 'abandon the meliorative venture of Bacon and Descartes, letting epistemology fall into place as chapters of psychology, sociology and the history of science'. I applaud exactly what Kitcher deplores, but exploring the differences between his representationalism and my Davidsonian anti-representationalism is beyond the scope of this essay.

30 See 'Science as Solidarity' and 'Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?' in my *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*.

31 In 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', p. 314. Davidson continues: 'Belief can be seen to be veridical by considering what determines the existence and contents of a belief. Belief, like the other so-called propositional attitudes, is supervenient on facts of various sorts, behavioral, neuro-physiological, biological and physical.' This naturalism about belief (one which James and Dewey would have applauded, and which I have tried to expound in my 'Non-Reductive Physicalism') is why belief cannot swing free of the world, in the way in which dreams do. It is important for seeing the relation of Davidson's thesis to Cartesian scepticism, to remember how much the

dreamer knows, and how little of his knowledge the realization that he is dreaming impugns – e.g., all those commonplace platitudes which are not about the way the dreamer's environment is presently arranged. Those who think that Descartes' First Meditation made scepticism an urgent philosophical topic typically brush over this point. Thus Barry Stroud, in his *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), says that the dreamer 'might be a physicist who knows a great deal about the way things are which the child does not know . . . There is therefore no incompatibility with knowing and dreaming' (p. 16). But he then goes on to say that this point 'does not affect Descartes' argument' because the physicist cannot know what he knows 'on the basis of the senses'. Indeed he cannot, but this idea that physics is 'based on the senses' is precisely the idea of 'a natural order of reasons' which Williams (following Sellars) rightly criticizes in chapter 2 of *Unnatural Doubts*. This passage in Stroud is a good illustration of the fact that the notion of such an order does *all* the work in the First Meditation. The possibility that one is dreaming does none.

32 See Davidson, 'Structure and Content', p. 298.

33 Had Dewey taken not only this point, but also Davidson's point that 'relativism about truth is perhaps always a symptom of infection by the epistemological virus', I think that he would have said fewer of the relativistic-sounding things for which he was constantly attacked by Lovejoy, Russell and others. Had he taken Williams' point, he would have realized that he could say most of what he wanted to say about what was wrong with traditional epistemological discussions of truth by talking about the context-dependent character of justification. Unlike Davidson, who takes a necessary condition of being a pragmatist to be precisely the infection by the virus in question, I take the only necessary condition to be the one Brandom offers: believing that there is nothing to said about truth which cannot be said on the basis of facts about, and explanations of, the proprieties of holding true. On such proprieties, see the closing pages of 'Structure and Content', in which Davidson expatiates on the role of norms and affects in belief-ascription, and thus in constructing T-theories.

34 And, of course, of the fact that if you don't speak a language you don't have many beliefs. Davidson thinks that you cannot have *any* beliefs. But for present purposes it is enough to say that dogs and infants can't have most of the ones we can have, unless we separate the having of a belief from our