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The Study of Pragmatic Theory of Truth

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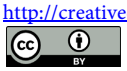

Abstract

Even though pragmatic theories of truth have gained more attention and become the center of philosophical debate, there is still no widely accepted consensus. Here, to address this issue, this article systematically sorts out the theories of truth proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, clarifies the evolution trajectory of these theories, identifies the theoretical core of the pragmatic theory of truth, and responds to key criticisms dialectically to clarify long-standing misunderstandings. Unlike traditional theories of truth, the pragmatic theory of truth takes "experience" as its ontological foundation, emphasizes the instrumental value of truth, and grounds the objectivity of truth in its scientific method of inquiry.

Keywords

Pragmatic Theory of Truth, Experience, Value of Truth, Scientific Method of Inquiry

1. Introduction

Classical pragmatism emerged in the United States at the close of the 19th century, with key representatives including Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. This philosophical movement garnered significant attention upon its introduction. Over more than a century of evolution, pragmatism has permeated American social culture, influencing character traits and behavioral patterns to a considerable degree. Moreover, through ongoing interactions with other philosophical thoughts and cultures, pragmatism has transcended national boundaries, exerting a profound impact on continental European philosophy, modern Chinese thought, and beyond. Undeniably, pragmatism has become an essential component of modern and contemporary philosophy. However, academic discourse surrounding pragmatic theories of truth remains far from satisfactory. Scholarly evaluations of this theory are predominantly critical, with affirmative

voices being few and far between; related interpretations, furthermore, often fall prey to one-sided cognitive misunderstandings.

A widely accepted misunderstanding is to simplistically identify James's idea that true thoughts always mean invaluable instruments of action with utilitarianism, and assert that the pragmatic theory of truth only pays attention to the usefulness of truth while neglecting its objectivity. In fact, when James expressed that truth is useful and satisfactory, what he essentially argues is that true thoughts are useful tools for our real life, "they lead us, namely, through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience with which we feel all the while—such feeling being among our potentialities—that the original ideas remain in agreement." (James, 1975) Thus, we are not allowed to simplistically equate James's view of truth with utilitarianism that reduces it to direct self-interest. In fact, by emphasizing the real utility of truth, James reminds us that the validity of truth lies in its ability to enable us to better communicate with the world and live a more coherent and effective life.

In this vein, we can also respond to Russell's challenge to James. Russell criticized that James's view of truth confused "truth" with "the utility of believing a proposition". In *Pragmatism: A Critical Sketch*, Russell argued that a false belief, (e.g., the belief that there are no dangerous animals in the neighborhood) may bring practical benefits, while a true belief (e.g., the belief that there is a potential danger) may also lead to temporary suffering (see Russell, 1910). Based on this, Russell claimed that what is useful is not always true, which challengs James's view of truth. However, it is important to note that while Russell's critique highlights the distinction between the usefulness and truthfulness of ideas, it misses the fact that James is emphasizing the harmony that the usefulness of an idea brings to the reality of an individual's life, rather than an isolated short-term effect. James has repeatedly emphasized in *Pragmatism* that the usefulness of truth is that its ability to guide us to the reality, whether directly or indirectly, and that truth can be useful only on the basis that past truths (or common sense) are in harmony with present ideas.

Another type of criticism focuses on Peirce's view of regarding "community of inquirers" as the criterion for the objectivity of ideas. For instance, Rorty once said that the "community of inquirers" of Peirce is an abstract concept and cannot exist in the real world, and in the real world, people's consensus may change due to the factors such as prejudice, group think, and political pressure (Rorty, 1982). There is no doubt that Rorty's ideas are particularly reasonable, but this criticism misinterprets Peirce's original intention. When explaining the principle of pragmatism, Peirce pointed out that the consolidation of beliefs and the attainment of truth is a social and historical process, and truth is the final opinion that is agreed upon by all researchers in the indefinite process of inquiry (Peirce, 1934). This means that Peirce did not regard the consensus of people at a specific moment as truth, but rather believed that truth is the ultimate view obtained through a continuous process of inquiry.

In my view, the primary cause of these critiques lies in the academic circle's lack of systematic sorting out, interpretation, and critical engagement with the pragmatic theory of truth. Therefore, this paper aims to address this problem by offering a holistic and in-depth analysis that not only traces the evolution of pragmatic truth theories but also responds to key criticisms dialectically. By doing this, it seeks to facilitate a profound understanding of the pragmatic theory of truth and help clarify and respond to the relevant controversies in academic circles.

2. The Evolution of the Pragmatic Theories of Truth

It is widely recognized that "to understand any doctrine it is necessary not only to consider its first enunciation but also its later developments." (Anschutz, 1924) This principle applies equally to the pragmatic view of truth. The conception of truth in pragmatism can be traced back to Peirce, gained prominence and significant transformation in the works of James, and reached its refinement and maturation in Dewey's philosophical thoughts. By retracing this developmental trajectory, we can more clearly delineate the evolution and underlying continuity of the pragmatic perspective on truth.

For Peirce, truth is not a pre-existing concept but rather a stable belief attained by resolving doubt through scientific methods. He defines truth as the "final opinion" fated to be agreed upon by all inquirers through unimpeded scientific inquiry. Peirce situates his discussion of truth within the framework of "inquiry-belief-action". This process commences with the question: Why do we seek (or need) the truth? Peirce's answer is that belief serves as our guiding principle for action and aids in the formation of behavioral patterns (Peirce, 1934). Generally speaking, having some definite beliefs is the natural state of the individual, in which we have a stable understanding of the world around us and are able to handle and cope with experiential life effortlessly. However, this stable mental state is not permanent, it will be disrupted by new experiences, such as puzzles or challenges, and doubts will arise as a result. Consequently, when this peace of mind is disturbed, there is a natural inclination to escape from doubt and regain faith. Thus, this journey of escaping from doubt and regaining stable beliefs is named by Peirce as inquiry. Therefore, the pursuit of truth stems from the inherent dissatisfaction of the individual mind. Then, how can we confirm that the beliefs we hold are true? Peirce's answer is that beliefs acquired through the scientific method are true beliefs. As for how to obtain beliefs, he proposed four methods: the method of tenacity, the method of authority, the a priori method, and the scientific method (Peirce, 1877). The method of tenacity regards existing beliefs as the ultimate truth. When confronted with new situations, someone who holds this method clings rigidly to these beliefs and refuses to accept alternative opinions and ideas. The method of authority highlights the truthfulness of views endorsed by authoritative figures or other institutions (such as states, churches, or other coercive monopolistic forces). It guards against all alternative perspectives and rejects them without distinction. The a priori method prioritizes transcendental

reasoning, which is not grounded in empirical observation or facts, thus beliefs obtained by this approach are disconnected from reality. In contrast, the scientific method acquires knowledge of empirical facts through hypothesis and verification, grounded in experience and reasoning. Therefore, in Peirce's perspective, only the scientific method is the most reliable way to attain truth because it is self-correcting: its reliance on public, repeatable experiments ensures that biases are eventually exposed and corrected.

To guarantee the objectivity of the scientific method, Peirce adds a crucial requirement: beliefs (i.e., truth) obtained through this method must be verified not only by one's own experience but also by the experiences of all inquirers, gaining universal recognition in the long run. And the "community of inquirers" is "not an actually existing group of people at some time, but an idealization: the ongoing, multi-generational enterprise of inquiry, in which the work of one inquirer is taken up, corrected, supplanted, by others" (Haack, 1993). At this point, its "consensus" does not refer to an actually achieved viewpoint but rather to a regulative ideal. In other words, only if our inquiry is sufficiently thorough and the consensus reached by the community is universal enough, can we approach the truth.

Peirce discusses the process of truth generation from the perspective of individual psychology and experience, emphasizing that truth (the general consensus of the community) can transform the state of mind of individuals from doubt to satisfaction, and help individuals establish the norms of action. At the same time, he reminds us that the scientific method is necessary to obtain truth (true beliefs). This perspective on truth diverges from the traditional Western philosophical theory that truth is the correspondence between an idea and reality. Instead, it underscores a pragmatic understanding of truth that prioritizes its effects. According to Peirce, truth, as well as other true ideas, are tools of individuals' life, and possess universality, which is derived from the collective consensus of the community of inquiry. Nevertheless, truth also embodies objectivity, which arises from the scientific method employed during the inquiry process and is validated through experience. Furthermore, truth holds validity, as it helps individuals establish guidelines for their actions and influences their practical endeavors.

As a close friend and fellow scholar, James's exploration of truth both inherits and expands upon Peirce's perspective. He not only follows Peirce's line of reasoning, which advances the discourse by examining the process through which truth emerges. Additionally, he maintains Peirce's emphasis on the validity of truth and the empirical verification of its objectivity. Nevertheless, significant differences remain between them in their understanding of truth.

In James's view, "truth" encompasses two lexical properties, the adjective "true" and the verb "to become true" or "truly". The former suggests that truthfulness is a certain property of ideas, and "it means their 'agreement', as falsity means their disagreement, with 'reality'" (James, 1975); the latter implies that truth arises from the alignment of ideas with reality, and it is through the process of alignment that ideas attain truthfulness. This perspective is closely tied to James's thinking on the

process through which truth emerges. James claims that truth is not an intrinsic characteristic of an idea; rather, it is a quality that must be ascertained. In other words, an idea becomes true only when it aligns with reality. However, his interpretation of the correspondence between ideas and reality diverges sharply from that of traditional philosophy, which holds that truth consists in the mirroring of external objective reality. James further interrogates: what is the significance of such "correspondence between ideas and reality"? Is the sole purpose of our pursuit of truth merely to produce a copy of external reality in our ideas? Driven by the pragmatist commitment to practical consequences, James expands and supplements the modes of "correspondence between an idea and reality". He argued that for the process of correspondence to be established, two conditions must be satisfied. one is, the ideas must be able to lead the individual into direct contact with reality or into other beings that are connected to reality (indirect contact); the other one is, such leading process must produce practical differences as well as be accompanied by good effects. The former condition dictates that truth must enable individuals to establish a connection with reality, whether directly or indirectly; the latter condition specifies that such a connection must be beneficial and capable of yielding practical effects. Naturally, these practical effects can be either material or spiritual—ultimately, they encompass all that facilitates individuals in navigating their experiential life smoothly and effortlessly.

Here, James particularly emphasizes that the process of 'correspondence between an idea and reality' renders the idea true, and that the process by which an idea becomes true aligns with how it exerts practical effects. On the one hand, he underscores the processual nature of truth: an idea attains truthfulness through the interactive coordination between itself and reality. On the other hand, he highlights the utility of truth: the practical significance of truths lies in the fact that "they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience" (James, 1975). Furthermore, James's reflections on truth also convey the following perspectives: the objectivity of truth is concrete, forged in the course of specific practical activities, and jointly determined by the idea, reality, and the mode of correspondence between them. Thus, truth can be pluralistic, for the modes of "correspondence" between an idea and reality are diverse—it can be a copy, a symbol, a potentiality, or an actuality.

James's reflections on truth underscore the processual nature of truth. He pays more attention to the modes of correspondence between ideas and reality, that is, how ideas enable individuals to better interact with reality rather than on prescribing the scientific methods of truth-generation. Meanwhile, James places greater emphasis on the subjectivity and utility of truth, and focuses on its efficacy in helping individuals establish effective connections with reality and live their experiential life smoothly. Moreover, James also highlights the relativity and pluralism of truth, arguing that the idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth, for the modes of correspondence between ideas and reality can be diverse; "truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes" (James, 1975).

Here, the differences between Peirce and James are also more obvious. Based on the above analysis, we can realize that Peirce's view of truth is rooted in a kind of scientific realism. For Peirce, truth is an objective and universal "final opinion" that emerges from a constantly advancing and rigorous process of scientific inquiry. Meanwhile, James claims a pluralism of truth, that is to say, truth is subjective, context-related, and closely linked to the direct "cash value" of ideas for individual experience. Therefore, we can say that Peirce's truth is collective and faced for future, while James's truth is personal and focused on present action. This major divergence between them also laid the groundwork for Dewey's later understanding of truth.

As the culmination of classical pragmatism, John Dewey's reflections on truth integrated the pragmatic ideas of Peirce and James while resolving their tensions. On the one hand, he rectified the disputes and criticisms caused by James's lack of logical rigor and unclear language in the discussion of truth, providing a more solid philosophical foundation for the pragmatist view of truth. On the other hand, he enriched and developed Peirce's inquiry process of "doubt-belief-action", enhancing the persuasiveness of the pragmatic view of truth.

Dewey's pragmatic perspective on truth is a comprehensive theory positing truth as a practical instrument facilitating problem-solving in social interactions. Truth, in this framework, is not an absolute entity but context-dependent, serving a specific purpose in particular circumstances. It is ascertainable through the accurate prediction of real-life outcomes based on truth. Dewey considers truth as a means of guiding actions, with its validity tested through lived experiences. This perspective is intricately linked to his naturalistic interpretation of experience, diverging from conventional empiricists by rejecting a sensory-based understanding of experience in epistemology. Dewey contends that viewing experience solely as a sensory tool for subject-object recognition oversimplifies its role, asserting instead that all knowledge stems from and is fundamentally rooted in experience. Dewey critiques this approach for confining experience to the subjective feelings of the individual. On this premise, to recognize objective reality outside the subject, one must seek a way beyond experience, i.e., a transcendental or a priori way, which creates a dichotomy between subject and object, and also ignores the character of experience itself and the ways in which it is put to full use. From a pragmatic standpoint, he conceptualizes experience as encompassing human history, culture, and life, representing humans' practical capacity to act upon nature. He posits that the relationship between humans and nature is not a dichotomy, as traditionally perceived by empiricists, but rather one characterized by interconnection and mutual influence. In this process, experience encompasses both the subject's and the object's dimensions. The former pertains to the practical activities of the subject interacting with the object, and the latter reflects the individual's experiential life. Experience is no longer static and passive; rather, it is dynamic and active. At this point, Dewey posited that our concepts, thoughts, and understandings, including truths, arise from the practical needs of individuals engaged

with the external world to address real survival challenges. This interaction serves to bridge real problems and existing experiences. Consequently, Dewey dismissed abstract truth and underscored the importance of its concreteness. Truth is invariably tied to specific practical situations, and no universal truth exists independent of these contexts. Furthermore, he highlighted the initiative and interactivity inherent in truth. It represents the mutual coordination and interaction between individuals and their environments within particular situations. Thus, neither the environment nor truth is fixed or eternal. Given that truth functions as a tool for individuals to engage with the external world, its validity must be demonstrated through empirical verification. Dewey therefore substituted "truth" with "warranted assertibility" (Dewey, 1984a) and proposed "the pattern of inquiry" (Dewey, 1984b) as the scientific method for uncovering truth—a method that integrates Peirce's emphasis on communal scientific inquiry with James's focus on practical problem-solving.

The perspectives on truth articulated by Peirce, James, and Dewey reveal that classical pragmatism transcends the abstraction and static nature characteristic of traditional views. It emphasizes the practicality and dynamic process of truth. First, pragmatism rejects the notion that truth passively imitates reality through ideas; instead, it asserts that truth must be connected to an individual's practices and real-life contexts. Second, pragmatism underscores the practical orientation of truth, positing that its value and significance reside in its specific functions within an individual's practical life, particularly in action and problem-solving. It employs "practical effect" and "cash value" as criteria for assessing the truth of ideas. Finally, pragmatism prioritizes the process and concreteness of truth, asserting that there is no ultimate truth, but rather concepts that gain relevance through their practical applications.

3. The Core of the Pragmatic Theory of Truth

From the above review and interpretation of the pragmatic view of truth, it can be found that the pragmatic theory of truth abandons the traditional truth theory's understanding of truth as a static, abstract and objective existence. Instead, it grasps truth from the process of the mutual relationship and interaction between the subject and the object, and recognizes truth from a procedural and dynamic perspective. It emphasizes the practical orientation of truth and highlights the specific influence and the significance of truth for individual practice. The universality of truth is based on the scientific nature of the methods for obtaining truth and the verifiability of truth. And these constitute the core of the pragmatic theory of truth as well as the key to understanding it.

First of all, in terms of ontology, classical pragmatism constructs its theory of truth with "experience" (radical experiences and natural experiences) as the core category, transcending the metaphysical inquiries into ontology in traditional philosophy. This is intrinsically associated with the pragmatists' understanding of reality. For instance, in William James' view, reality can be divided into three parts.

The first part is "the flux of our sensations", which is neither true nor false, but simply exists; the second part is "the relations that obtain between our sensations or between their copies in our minds", this part is determined entirely by us because it cannot speak for itself; and the third part is "the previous truths of which every new inquiry takes account". (James, 1975) Therefore, in James's view, there is no independent reality external to human thought. Even if such reality exists, its being means nothing unless someone has formed beliefs about it. Based on this, pragmatists argue that reality does not exist objectively, and we are not able to have any beliefs or knowledge about completely pure objective reality. The reality that enters the subject's purview and becomes cognizable is always the reality processed through individual sensation and thinking. In short, the reality for pragmatism is mutable and perpetually emergent. Only when reality enters into the individual's empirical life does it acquire significance, and such a kind of reality thereby becomes what pragmatists regard as "experience". Consequently, pragmatism refrains from discussing pure external existence and instead takes experience as the core for constructing truth.

Second, in terms of axiology, pragmatic theory of truth emphasizes that the truthfulness of an idea lies in the beneficial effects it exerts within concrete empirical activities, and highlights the subjectivity and usefulness of truth. For instance, James regarded the satisfactory practical effects arising from the correspondence between an idea and reality as a necessary condition for the process of truth, which directly links truthfulness to the satisfaction of individual needs and reveals the practical value of truth. Similarly, Peirce regards truth as a tool that helps people resolve doubts and establish norms of action; and in Dewey's eyes, truth is a tool that enables individuals to engage with the world and solve problems in specific situations. However, it must be clarified that this is not utilitarianism, as critics like Russell have claimed. Ultimately, in the pragmatic framework, the truthfulness of an idea is rooted in someone's empirical activities and validated by the effects it yields in specific practical contexts. Given that the truthfulness of an idea is tied to personal experience and concrete situations, and contingent upon the satisfaction of individual demands or the resolution of problems, different individuals may formulate distinct versions of "truth". This, in turn, implies that pragmatists advocate a pluralistic theory of truth, which means that truth is not something immutable and existing objectively, nor is it a mirror-like copy of external reality; rather, it represents diverse perspectives on viewing problems, varied approaches to solving them, different modes of engaging with experience, and distinct ways of interacting with the world.

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, the pragmatic view of truth emphasizes the scientific nature of the methods employed to attain truth. Pragmatists perceive truth as a process, advocating that ideas gain their validity through practical application and must be subjected to empirical testing. To affirm the objectivity of truth, Peirce argued that the pursuit of truth should be grounded in scientific methods. Concepts validated by personal experience must also undergo

scrutiny through the experiences of others to be recognized as truth. James similarly acknowledged that truth operates within a belief system, asserting that concepts repeatedly confirmed by collective experience become accepted as truth (or common sense in James's view). Dewey further highlighted the social dimension of truth, positing that the ultimate aim of individual interactions with the world is the collective advancement of individuals and society. It is clear that pragmatists anchor the objectivity of truth in the scientific nature of the methods used to obtain it, striving to ensure the validity of ideas through these rigorous methodologies. Moreover, the pragmatists' understanding of the scientific method, such as that of Peirce and Dewey, also responds to contemporary criticism of the objectivity of consensus. The emphasis of the scientific method on empirical verification, public examination and self-correction can effectively reduce the risk of bias or group think. At the same time, the ideal of an infinitely continuous community of inquirers ensures that truth will not be reduced to a fleeting consensus.

4. Conclusion

This study, through in-depth sorting out and analysis of the thoughts of the three key representatives of pragmatism, clarified the theoretical continuity and development of the classical pragmatism view of truth, and responds to the long-standing one-sided misunderstanding and criticism of this theory in the academic circle to a certain extent. The pragmatic theory of truth focuses on the practical significance of the truthfulness of ideas and understands truth from a dynamic and processual perspective. By doing so, it provides a unique ideological path to transcend the limitations of traditional truth theories.

At the ontological level, the pragmatic theory of truth constructs its theoretical system with "experience" as the core category, breaking from the metaphysical inquiries into ontology in traditional philosophy. It abandons the subject-object dualistic thinking inherent in classical empiricism, conceiving of reality as a dynamically generated and constructive existence forged through the interaction between humans and the world. At the axiological level, pragmatism's emphasis on truth's instrumental value and pluralism challenges the dogmatic pursuit of absolute and universal truth, while distinguishing itself from crass utilitarianism by emphasizing sustained practical coherence. Methodologically, its commitment to scientific inquiry and social verification responds to relativist doubts and contemporary critiques of consensus, providing a solid guarantee for truth's objectivity: truth's universality derives from the scientific nature of inquiry methods and the verifiability of truth itself, rather than transcendental standards. This practice-based objectivity ensures truth's universal relevance while enabling it to respond to the dynamic changes of experience.

In summary, the pragmatic theory of truth integrates processuality, practicality, and pluralism, constructing a highly persuasive philosophical framework that successfully transcends the limitations of traditional truth theories. Grounded in experience, oriented toward utility, and supported by scientific methods, it offers a

powerful philosophical framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between thought, action, and reality. Future research may further explore the intersections of the pragmatic theory of truth with contemporary philosophical issues—such as dialogues with post-truth discourse and digital epistemology—while tapping into its practical value in fields like education, ethics, and social policy. As a cornerstone of modern and contemporary philosophy, the pragmatic theory of truth continues to spark critical discussions, providing an inexhaustible source of intellectual resources for interpreting the complex nature of human knowledge production and practical activities.

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