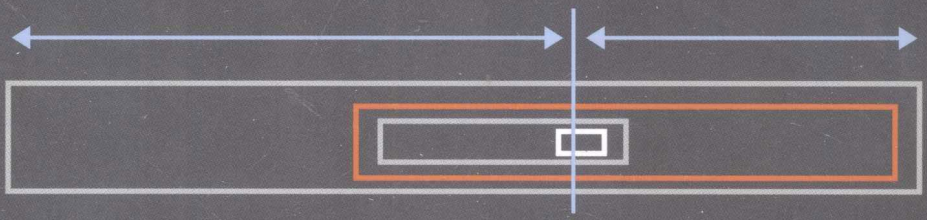
Cognitive Pragmatism

The Theory of Knowledge in Pragmatic Perspective



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PREFACE

This book was written in Pittsburgh during the 1999–2000 academic year. However, it brings together ideas and doctrines regarding pragmatism developed over a long period, beginning with my 1973 book on *The Primacy of Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell). The proximate cause of the book was the coincidence of two invitations to contribute to celebratory volumes in honor of colleagues Hilary Putnam and Ernest Sosa. The material prepared for these occasions constitutes the substance of the first two chapters. Three further chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 9) are based on earlier publications, the details of which are given in the endnotes to those chapters.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for her competence and patience in producing the final word-processed draft of the manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge development is a practice that we humans pursue because we have a need for its products. The cognitive project is accordingly a deeply *practical* endeavor, irrespective of whatever purely theoretical interest may attach to its results.

Knowledge brings great benefits. The relief of ignorance is foremost among them. We have evolved within nature to fill the ecological niche of an intelligent being. In consequence, the need for understanding, for "knowing one's way about," is one of the most fundamental demands of the human condition. Man is *Homo quaerens.* The need for knowledge is part and parcel to our nature. A deeply rooted demand for information and understanding presses in upon us, and we have little choice but to satisfy it. Once the ball is set rolling it keeps on going under its own momentum—far beyond the limits of strictly practical necessity. The great Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen put it well. What drives men to explore the polar regions, he said, is

> the power of the unknown over the human spirit. As ideas have cleared with the ages, so has this power extended its might, and driven Man willy-nilly onwards along the path of progress. It drives us in to Nature's hidden powers and secrets, down to the immeasurably little world of the microscopic, and out into the unprobed expanses of the Universe. . . . it gives us no peace until we know this planet on which we live, from the greatest depth of the ocean to the highest layers of the atmosphere. This Power runs like a strand through the whole history of polar exploration. In spite of all declarations of possible profit in one way or another, it was that which, in our hearts, has always driven us back there again, despite all setbacks and suffering.[1]

The discomfort of unknowing is a natural aspect of human sensibility. To be ignorant of what goes on about us is almost physically painful for us—no doubt because it is so dangerous from an evolutionary point of view. It is a situational imperative for humans to acquire information about the world. Homo sapiens is a creature that must, by its very nature,

feel cognitively at home in the world. The requirement for information, for cognitive orientation within our environment, is as pressing a human need as that for food itself. The basic human urge to make sense of things is a characteristic aspect of our makeup—we cannot live a satisfactory life in an environment we do not understand. For us intelligent creatures, cognitive orientation is itself a practical need: cognitive disorientation is physically stressful and distressing. As William James observed, "It is of the utmost practical importance to an animal that he should have prevision of the qualities of the objects that surround him."[2]

Not only is knowledge indispensably useful for our practice, the reverse is true as well. Knowledge development is itself a practice, and various practical processes and perspectives are correspondingly useful—or even necessary—to the way in which we go about constituting and validating our knowledge. Examining these praxis-oriented approaches to knowledge development is one of the prime tasks of this book. Its principal thesis is that we have not only the (trivial) circumstance that knowledge is required for effective practice, but also the reverse, that practical and pragmatic considerations are crucially at work in the way in which human knowledge comes to be secured.

The book unites ideas and arguments that I have worked out over many years. It thus seeks to give a systematic and synoptic presentation of the cognitive *pragmatism* that characterizes all of my work in this domain.

The first half of the book (Chapters 1–6) deals with the nature of our knowledge and the rationale of knowledge claims. The deliberations at work here issue from the consideration that inquiry, like any other human project, involves the risk of failure because the pursuit of knowledge is indissolubly bound up with the possibility of error. The sensible response here is not skepticism but a practical-minded realism that faces the fact that in the pursuit of knowledge, as elsewhere, we have no alternative but simply to do the best we can. And this means that the processes of inductive and probative reasoning that we routinely use for the substantiation of claims to knowledge must ultimately rely for their own substantiation on practical rather than purely theoretical considerations.

The remaining chapters (Chapters 7–10) examine how this pragmatic grounding of knowledge works itself out in a variety of contexts (specifically particular existential conditions, claims of totality, inductive gener-

alization, and counterfactual reasoning). The aim here is to illustrate such theoretical and abstract issues in a pragmatic, unprobabilistic light.

Viewed in closer detail, the road map of the book is as follows: Chapter 1 argues that, since rational inquiry is a functional, goal-directed enterprise whose characterizing mission is that of truth estimation, the arbitrament of practice—especially in relation to issues of prediction and control—serves as a standard of adequacy here. Chapter 2 shows that, thanks to the cognitive bearing of sensory experience upon knowledge, this practicalistic dimension endows evolutionary considerations—as regards both natural and rational selection—with a key place in the epistemic realm. And Chapter 3 extends this perspective from the sensory to the conceptual and in particular the categorical realm. Chapter 4 shows how the truth-estimational conception of inquiry constrains us to see cognition as subject to a variety of characteristic limits and limitations. But Chapter 5 argues that skepticism must nevertheless be rejected, if only thanks to the consideration of its refusal to follow the ground rules of rational practice in the presence of risks. Chapter 6 seeks to demonstrate that a plausible theory of cognitive realism can be developed within a pragmatic rationale. Chapter 7 explains how induction can be understood and legitimated in the light of this approach. Chapter 8 shows that no sort of vicious circularity is involved in providing a rational validation of the role of reason in inquiry, since in the end practical reason is used to validate theoretical reason. The following chapters illustrate how the pragmatic ground rules of effective communicative practice suffice to overcome a significant range of familiar epistemic puzzles and paradoxes, specifically in relation to totalization fallacies (Chapter 9) and counterfactual reasoning (Chapter 10). Finally the appendix uses the mechanisms of formalized epistemology to clarify the pervasive issue of cognitive limitations.

All in all, the principal message of the book is that in matters of inquiry and cognition the interrelationship of practical and theoretical issues is both more intimate and more complex than theorists of knowledge generally recognize.

O N E

Knowledge of the Truth in Pragmatic Perspective

1. Internal Realism and Truth as (Available) Warrant

The pursuit of knowledge aims at discovering the truth of things. But if truth pivots on the idea that truths state how things actually stand, without any inherent reference to our beliefs, views, and opinions—if, as mainstream tradition has it, truth is something altogether detached from human thought and ideas—then how can we possibly achieve knowledge about it? How could we ever validly claim that our thought corresponds with thought-external reality so as to get at the real truth? How can we get there from here?

As Hilary Putnam puts it, a whole host of contemporary philosophers (including Putnam himself) react to this formidable challenge by adopting the seemingly heretical view that truth must be construed in terms of humanly available warrant and "that our grasp on the notion of truth must not be represented . . . by a relation called 'correspondence' to something totally independent of the practices by which we decide what is and what is not true."[1] To be sure, ordinarily people (many philosophers included) would hold that the truth is something we discover, and that whereas we do indeed *decide what to accept as true,* since acceptance is something that we actually do, we are not ordinarily in a position to *decide the actual truth of things.* But it is exactly this distinction between what "really is true" and what "we are prepared to accept as true" that philosophers of the tendency Putnam endorses decline to acknowledge.

All the same, such a contrast rejection has its problems. After all, with "what is true" there can—by hypothesis—be no further question of correctness. But with what we (or anyone) actually accept as true, there still looms before us the ever-additional question, "Is this acceptance really warranted?" However, it is just this gap between factually actual and normatively appropriate acceptance that these "internalist" truth theorists seek to close by injecting some element of normativity into the acceptances at issue. For the we/us of "we decide what is true" is, according to their approach, not the we/us of this imperfect dispensation of ours in the spatiotemporal present, but the "we" of the scientific community of the eventual future—or of some other comparably idealized group of rational inquirers. Pragmatism's founding father, C. S. Peirce, initially proposed to domesticate "the truth about reality" by construing it as a matter of *ultimate* science—that is to say, it is the "final irreversible opinion" of the scientific community once its thought becomes settled and fixed. Truth, so regarded, is the opinion that science will eventually reach, being "fated" (as Peirce puts it) to be achieved ultimately by the efforts of the ongoing scientific community. And this led him to his well-known characterization of truth as "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate [by the use of scientific methods]." On third thought, however, Peirce shifted from what the scientific community *will* (and *must*) eventually realize to what it *would* realize if its efforts continued long enough in sufficiently favorable circumstances. With this more cautious approach in view, he held that the truth is "what any man *would* believe in, and be ready to act upon, if his investigations *were* pushed sufficiently far."[2] The subjunctive is called upon to do real work here. And along these lines Putnam's *Representation and Reality* also proposes "idealized rational acceptability" as a definition of truth.

Nevertheless such an approach involves difficulties and faces obstacles of which Peirce himself was perfectly aware. The idea that truth is what future science will deliver into our hands about nature is open to a series of "what if" objections:

- What if inquiry ended owing to the extinction of intelligent life?
- What if inquiry came to a stop because of the indolence (fecklessness, laziness) of scientific workers?
- What if inquiry were hamstrung because of human limitations: because scientists are not smart enough or imaginative enough to look

upon the theories required to characterize nature's modus operandi correctly?

- What if inquiry were blocked because of a lack of resource commitments: science might never be able to afford the large-scale instruments and experiments needed to advance its frontiers?

In the face of "what if" concerns of this sort, a theory that equates the truth with the product of inquiry would undergo the following series of saving transformations and sophistications to the effect that the truth is:

- What science will eventually deliver.
- What science will deliver in the theoretical long run, that is, what it would deliver if it continued long enough.
- What ideally able scientists (i.e., those practicing the scientific method with ideal competence) would deliver if they continued their efforts long enough.
- What ideally able scientists working under ideally favorable conditions (and thus without any resource constraints) would deliver if they continued their efforts long enough.

In contemplating this series, three considerations become clear:

1. The demands of plausibility force us to move along this path because otherwise these "what if" objections would render the theory of "truth = product of inquiry" untenable.
2. A continually growing amount of idealization is going on here, as we shift from simple futurity in this world eventually to reach hypothetical realizability under utterly unrealistic conditions.
3. By the end of the series, the thrill has run out of the process. For with the equation "truth = the product of *idealized* inquiry" we arrive at a position that is substantially emasculated, true enough but virtually trivial. No reasonable person could—or surely would—question that the truth is what absolutely idealized inquiry would deliver into our hands in absolutely idealized conditions. But this result is now not so much an interesting theory about the nature of truth as a near-tautological gloss on what is at issue with "absolutely ideal inquiry."

The problem is that cognitive idealization is not a cost-free resource. For it is, or should be, clear that the more strongly we gerrymander that group of truth deciders into an ideal fraternity of rational inquirers proceeding in ideal and unrestrictedly optimized circumstances, the more we lose the putative advantage that initially motivated this whole approach.