

# Pragmatism on Meaning and Social Science

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In this paper I aim to develop a pragmatist theory of meaning and show how it informs our conception of social science. Along the way, I discuss epistemic foundations and metaphysics as they relate to the pragmatist theory of meaning. The pragmatism I develop is based on the work of Peirce, James and Dewey. However I am more concerned with developing a theory of meaning that is workable rather than faithful to one or more authors' vision. For example, I enlist the help of contemporary philosophers whose relationship to pragmatism is, at best, unclear. The pragmatist theory of meaning is central to the pragmatist project and is useful for clarifying issues surrounding the fact/value dichotomy in the sciences. I will argue that a pragmatic theory of meaning offers a way to understand social science that is both sensitive to the fullness and complexity of human activity, while holding on to the objectivity that science promises.

## Pragmatist Meaning and Interpretation

The meanings of words, according to pragmatism, refer to the cause and effect relationships of objects.<sup>1</sup> As C.S. Peirce states:

It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Peirce, 1997, p. 36)

William James puts the point in terms of differences.

The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one. (James, 1955, p. 45)

Differences in meaning accompany a difference in practice. But we must define this aspect of pragmatist meaning carefully.<sup>2</sup> As Peirce states, "...there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice." (Peirce, 1997, p. 35). Here Peirce emphasizes that meaning includes some sort of disposition to act. Differences in meaning, not only include differences in cause and effect in the world, they include differences in our actions (our causes and effects on the world) as well. However, action must figure into the equation in a very general way. Differences in meaning do not entail differences in actual practice, but would entail a difference in practice under counterfactual circumstances. To put the point another way, sometimes shades of meaning are such that varying them under similar circumstances would not result in different actions. Some differences in meaning are washed out in action. The difference between believing cars can only have four wheels, and believing that cars can have four or five wheels may not make any difference in actual behavior. Although, differing meanings must cause different

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<sup>1</sup> Causality has been a central topic in analytic philosophy. The concept of causation is a mess; it is employed so often and in countless contexts. There is probably no theory of causation that will handle all our causal intuitions. So I will leave the term unanalyzed even though I constantly use it. The reason is that for any workable theory of causation the adequacy of pragmatist meaning is not affected.

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term "meaning" to cover beliefs as well. The two are not identical, but if you know the meanings of someone's speech or writing I assume it is a short step to knowing their beliefs.

actions under at least some set of circumstances. Also, actions must be taken as general in a different but related way as including actions that are not overt such as waiting, hiding, or contemplating. The differences in action may be only in experience.

Meaning should not be identified with actual behavior, but must include the many ways we could predict and control the object in question as well. The inclusion of counterfactual interactions separates pragmatism from a crude behaviorism, for meanings are not identified with actual behaviors. One reason we identify a speaker's meanings with more than their actual behavior is that meanings should be a guide to how the speaker will act in the future and has acted in the past. Identifying meanings with actual interactions would limit this predictive aspect of meanings.

Another point about pragmatist meaning is that beliefs about an object need not grasp all the cause and effect relationships of that object in order to be true beliefs. As long as our interactions with the object pan out the way we expect, this counts towards their truthfulness. Of course, all our claims to truth will be open for questioning, but the analysis of true beliefs will be that the meanings adequately predict and control the objects the beliefs are about. We need not include all possible causal relations of an object since this would be too stringent a criterion, as objects have an infinite amount of actual and counterfactual relationships. It is absurd to think that anyone need know how much sun their car is reflecting (a causal interaction) in order to have true beliefs about their car. More needs to be said about how to delineate individual meanings, but a full treatment of this topic would take us too far a field.

As I hinted above, the pragmatist theory of meaning offers a factual claim about what meanings are actually consist in, as well as a method to evaluate these beliefs. Here is a moment from Peirce:

I only desire to point out how impossible it is that we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but conceived sensible effects of things. Our idea we have of anything is our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive our selves, and mistake a mere sensation accompanying the thought for a part of the thought itself. (Peirce, 1997, p. 36)

Here is what I think Peirce is saying: take any idea of an object, applying the pragmatist theory of meaning, we know what the idea is, a model of certain cause and effect relationships. If you think that part of your idea is not about cause and effect relationships, you are mistaken, that thought is not part of the idea itself.

Peirce is arguing against those that hold, perhaps tacitly, that knowledge is knowledge of things beyond the senses. We don't need a formal contradiction to see that Peirce has pointed to a real tension here. How can we possibly have any knowledge if knowledge cannot be gained through the ways we interact with the world, mainly the experiences gained through the senses. But we can put the point more generally and gain clarity by foregoing problematic talk of "senses" and stick to the vocabulary of cause and effect relationships. We can restate Peirce's point and say that the world is constituted by cause and effect relationships and as natural beings we can only gain information about the world by exploiting these causal relationships.<sup>3</sup> Hence, if we accept a general picture of humans as natural organisms, all our ideas, whether we like it or not, are created and constituted by the causal nexus that makes up the world, for there is nothing else to constitute and create them

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<sup>3</sup> I construe cause and effect relationships broadly and commonsensically to include any and all levels of causation, not just those of physics or some other level.

(Dewey, 1910a, p. 156). Acceptance of the pragmatist metaphysics of meaning excludes the possibility that there are objects that have no cause and effect relationships.<sup>4</sup> What the pragmatist theory of meaning is supposed to do is focus the search for truth on the elucidation and testing of our meanings against our other beliefs about the world. True sentences are meanings that accurately describe these causal relationships of the object; false sentences have meanings that are inadequate. Pragmatist meaning is also meant to be an alternative to theories that describe meanings as referring to essences, or a priori knowledge beyond cause and effects relationships. Given the view of humans as natural creatures who gain knowledge of the world through these causal relationships, this is what knowledge consists in. There are no further facts to be known, although there could be further facts.

If someone claims that part of their conception of an object contains something that is not a cause and effect relationship the pragmatist will show how that part would actually have causal powers, in which case we can perhaps investigate whether the object does have that aspect. Or, if the objector still insists that the part of the concept does not have causal powers, the pragmatist will ask how it is even possible they could know anything about it, given the natural story of humans and their ways of knowing.

In “Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth” Leszek Kolakowski brings up a problem for the approach to meaning, belief and truth that I have presented, or for any approach.

“... [W]e could build a world where there would be no such objects as “horse,” “leaf,” “star,” and others allegedly devised by nature. Instead, there might be, for example, such objects as “half a horse and a piece of river,” “my ear and the moon,” and other similar products of a surrealist imagination...The problem is just that it is hard for us to imagine how such a world would appear, since it would be composed of objects we have no words to describe, and hence it would be inaccessible to our linguistic cognition. (Kolakowski, 1968, p. 48)

If this sort of scenario were possible, it would be devastating for a pragmatist project. There could very well be language users, perhaps in our midst, whom we could not understand. Perhaps the barriers of culture, history or experience make communication and shared meaning impossible. Donald Davidson’s response to the above argument would be to pose a dilemma. If we understood a being using the term, “my ear and the moon”, to denote her ear and the moon, then if observed behavior supports this we have successfully translated her. Hence the object, her ear and the moon is in fact “accessible to our linguistic cognition”. But if, on the other hand, we heard the utterance “my ear and the moon” and we were unable to understand what she was talking about, we certainly couldn’t translate it into English. If we can’t translate then we have no evidence either way that this person’s language is inaccessible to our linguistic cognition (Davidson, 2001a, p. 183-98).<sup>5</sup> What we have in the case where we hear the utterance “my ear and the moon” but do not know what it means is either a case where there is no meaning, or a case where we are clearly dealing with a rational agent, but are not clear how to translate everything. So, on the one hand we have successful translation, on the other no reason or evidence to think translation is impossible.

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<sup>4</sup> However, this does not mean that all religious ideas must be abandoned. The existence of an afterlife, for example, if true, will have many effects on us and so the idea has meaning.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Davidson has stated that he is not a pragmatist, but perhaps he does not wish to be identified with the pragmatism he associates with Richard Rorty, although he agrees with Rorty on some issues. See the ‘afterthoughts’ section on pp. 154-7 of Davidson (2001b).

As Simon Blackburn explains it, when we interpret a new language or our neighbor who speaks our language, we place an “interpretive grid” on their communications and action (Blackburn, 1998, p. 134-6). We must assume to understand the speaker to have beliefs and desires, use a linguistic grammar, and have a basic grasp of the world, etc. if we are to understand anything at all. We do not translate piecemeal; we translate individual statements on the basis of shared background beliefs. Just as some foundational beliefs we hold are not optional for ourselves, so to, we are forced to attribute certain beliefs to those we are translating. If we have not ascribed meanings to the behavior of a being, then we cannot have as of yet, attribute any beliefs at all. The upshot of this argument is that there are no rational beings who we cannot translate; there are only rational beings that we are in various stages of translating. Rationality is translatability.<sup>6</sup>

One underlying motivation for the idea that there can be differing competing, but equally “valid” conceptual schemes is that our translations always slide over differences in meaning. That is, it is easy to prematurely close off translation, leaving cultural differences obscured. A related fear is that when we deal with those differing from us we will project our morals and ideas onto those we are interpreting. In this case, not only do we have an incorrect translation, but we lose the critical distance to our own ways that entering into conversation with other cultures creates. These fears are well founded. However, allowing for differing conceptual schemes can have the same negative effects, for if we cannot really understand another rational person, why attempt any interpretation at all? Also, the belief that there are differing conceptual schemes sets up a metaphysical barrier between ourselves and those that differ, a barrier that is somehow bridged by the person telling us that the barrier cannot be crossed. (Davidson, 2001a, pp. 184).

Recall my reconstruction of the Peircian argument for meanings as models of cause and effect relationships: if we accept that humans are natural beings, there is no way for there to be any sort of knowledge beyond the differences things make in the world. For there is no way to articulate what those non-causal facts could be, or how we could know about them. Davidson’s argument is analogous except it is applied to the possibility of differing conceptual schemes, rather than the possibility of knowledge outside of causal relationships. There is no possible evidence that could lead us to interpret another being as having a different conceptual scheme such as attempted by Kolakowski.

Peirce reminds us that we cannot confront the totality of our beliefs; we can only confront them using the resources of our other beliefs (Pierce, 1868, pp. 4-5). Davidson echoes Pierce when argues that we cannot evaluate our beliefs except using our other beliefs (Davidson, 2001b, pp. 141). However, I think Davidson would go further and say the same is true in interpretation; we cannot interpret without appealing to our own beliefs about the objects that are interacting with the interpreted (Davidson, 2001b, pp. 148-149).

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<sup>6</sup> We may encounter someone who states that they do not accept, say, the law of the excluded middle. This belief while being mistaken, does not mean that we cannot ascribe the opposing belief to them. We may take them as authoritative about this belief in regard to compartmentalized zone of academic discourse or a metalanguage. But the combination of speech, behavior and relationship to one’s environment is what makes meaning. In this case we can watch this person and observe their everyday speech and behavior as they interact with the world. What we will find in order to understand them at all we must ascribe the tacit belief in the law of excluded middle in order to understand their actions and speech. Individuals do not have total authority over their beliefs, although there is a presumption of authority for most of their everyday beliefs.

A pragmatic theory of interpretation lets us have our cake and eat it too. Paying attention to all forms of evidence, such as behavior, speech, and the cultural environment, forms the basis of meaning. Also this will form the basis for examining our interpretations of others in a way that seeks to understand the differences of others, while also seeing the necessity of having a minimal grid of agreement on which differences can appear. That is, a great amount of shared beliefs is necessary for disagreement to be understandable (Davidson, 2001b). We check ourselves by testing our translations against the speakers. If we are able to predict what they do and how they interact with the world, this is confirming evidence that our translation is correct. The pragmatist theory of meaning forms the basis from which we can evaluate and examine our interpretations of others.

When we interpret other speakers, whether speakers using our own language or a different one, we only have access to how they interact with the world. Meanings are models of causal interactions; interpreting other is extrapolating their meanings. An extra layer of complexity is added in interpretation, since we must model not only the world, but also the speaker's behavior towards the world. We can only do so using our own beliefs about the persons and objects we experience. For the most part, we start our daily interactions assuming many things, but the support we get along the way for our fallible meanings is the behavior of speakers. Successful communication consists solely in both parties predicting the others behavior against the world. The beliefs of interpreted speakers are models of the speaker's disposition to behave towards those objects. Since the bases of meanings are causal interactions that model other causal interactions, our beliefs about other speakers' meanings are causal interactions that model the causal relationships of other speakers.

Interpretation can fail at any number of points and often does. But the pragmatist story of meaning and interpretation shows us that there is no special epistemic, metaphysical, or linguistic barrier between us and them, between worlds of experience. Successful prediction and control and successful prediction of other speakers, is indicative successful interpretation and communication. There are no language users that are uninterpretable; there are only language users where various limitations of information or time prevent successful interpretation. Once we have a background of shared meanings, disagreements can appear, but the method for arriving at agreement is the same as was used in interpretation. Both parties can interact with the world, eliciting the causal relationships that can resolve the disagreement. Once we see meanings and interpretation as causal relationships all the way through, we can cease to worry about incompatible world views and focus on ways to speed and catalyze the convergence of meanings with the world. Interpreting others is harder, but essentially no different, than interpreting the world, where we exploit the information that is out there. Meanings are constituted by models of causal interactions. Successful prediction and control of the world, along with prediction of other language users is constitutive of accurate translation of others' meanings. For the pragmatist, meanings are (to various degrees) public and therefore are always open for exploitation by other language using beings.

### Pragmatist Metaphysics and Truth

Hilary Putnam contends that any sort of articulation of the relation between our theories and the world is bound to fail. Since there is no way to articulate the relationship between our theories and the world, our vision of cognitive values (such as simplicity or explanatory power) fill the epistemic void. Putnam concludes from this that "...the "real world" depends upon our values..." (Putnam, 1981, p. 346)

To counter this argument we can articulate the way the naturalist metaphysics of pragmatism links with the pragmatist theory of meanings. Meaning occurs at the casual nexus between the organism and the world. The world is systems of interactions, and our meanings are also interacting in this causal web, some of them successfully and accurately modeling objects in the world. The naturalist metaphysics of humans as organisms entails that successful prediction and control is all there is to grasping the portion of the world in question. No meta-bridge is necessary. We must demarcate the insides from the outsides, ourselves from the world, but this is essentially no more difficult than demarcating any other object from the rest of existence. We don't need a transcendental theory of how our language corresponds or matches up with the world, we have a natural one. Our meanings are composed of causal interactions of the world, some of them accurately and successfully model other causal interactions outside the head. True beliefs are those that accurately exploit information from the world and then use that information to change and navigate the environment in relation to a set of purposes. The pragmatist theory of meaning itself is true because it accurately describes the causal interactions between mind and world that we call meanings. The pragmatist theory of meaning is an accurate model of how other causal interactions model other causal interactions (Dewey, 1910a, p. 164). With the pragmatist theory in hand we can predict others' behavior and control our meanings so they can better fulfill their primary function, which is to accurately describe the world.

In 'A Catechism Concerning Truth', John Dewey argues against a theory of truth that posits a reality of objects independent of the ways in which we find out about those objects. Dewey's theory of truth links true beliefs directly with the interactions we have with things. This is what "things" are, sets of cause and effect relationships. True beliefs are the sum of predictions and retrodictions of things, according to a set of purposes, where our predictions and retrodictions match and mesh with the world. Dewey treats the phrase "correspondence to reality" as merely a synonym for truth, rather than a name for an exhaustive theory of how our language matches up with the world. What Dewey argues against is an a priori correspondence theory of how our interactions with the world allow us to grasp the essence of things which are independent of these interactions. Dewey argues that the articulation of the nature of truth will be specific and piecemeal, and based on the interactions of our investigations, rather than articulated prior to them (Dewey, 1910a, p. 158). So Dewey's answer to Putnam is that we don't need a general theory of truth, we have many specific ones.

Science's story that humans have been designed by evolution does not give us the justification of our beliefs. We would believe them anyway and be justified in doing so. But the general scientific picture of reality allows us to articulate the metaphysics of pragmatism that shows how it is probable that most of our beliefs are true. For it is unlikely that natural selection of genes and memes would allow creatures of our complexity that are massively wrong to survive. Success in evolutionary terms tends to create mechanisms in creatures that accurately describe reality. As Dennett Daniel puts the point:

Getting it right, not making mistakes, has been of paramount importance to every living thing on this planet for more than three billion years, and so these organisms have evolved thousands of different ways of finding out about the world they live in, discriminating friends from foes, meals from mates, and ignoring the rest for the most part.... (Dennett, 1998, para 17)

And the sciences give us the means to refine and explain how we obtain this knowledge. This conception of truth is not identical to the success that is selected for by evolution, but it does give the

metaphysical picture of humans as exploiting information through interaction which shows what is occurring when we truly believe.<sup>7</sup> The rest of our knowledge is “bootstrapping” where we criticize and test our beliefs against one another, using tools and techniques to help us see our mistakes and understand normally hidden mechanisms (Dennett, 1998, para. 20).

We can easily think up evolutionary “just so” stories to bolster this. Situations in our environment are determinate. Either the rustling in the bushes is a predator, or it is not. Either the deer will bolt if I move closer or it will not. Either these berries will make me sick or they will not. In this way, the way the world is, really, becomes our patterns of interacting that are developed both in our biology and in our culture (Hook, 1927, ch. 3). Successful prediction and control is the epistemological indicator of truth. Dispositions to behave and communicate in relation to objects in the world are the analyses of meaning, but only the total etiology of humans gives us the scientific justification that our meanings accurately model objects in the world.

John Dewey contends that true beliefs are what we normally think they are. The states of affairs that are the objects of true beliefs are objective, hold whether or not we want them to, and hold whether or not anyone is around to believe them (Dewey, 1910, p. 158-9). The maps of causal relationships that form our meanings match up to varying degrees with the world. Pragmatism’s natural picture of humans exploiting information in the casual web using mechanisms designed by evolution shows us how our beliefs can be true, how they can be about the world. In short, true beliefs are formed by, a part of, and at the same time about the world.

A possible objection is that while my claim that true beliefs are constituted by successful prediction and control is not a priori it is none the less a product of armchair reasoning and hence dogmatic. In order to answer this objection I think we should take seriously Dewey’s claim that truth conditions will be by “iteration” (Dewey, 1910a, p. 158). The formulations I have been using throughout the paper are general and as such generate only the broadest conditions for getting at the truth. The truth conditions that have bite reside at more specific levels, whereas talk of pragmatist meanings is much like a summary of the current story science tells us about ourselves. The content of this summary is, and will continue to be, filled in by specific scientific investigations. So, the explication of causal relationships and successful prediction and control as criteria for determining the truth should not be construed as identical to the concept of truth or a “theory of truth” that exhausts the idea of truth. What I do claim is that it articulates what truth consists in when we arrive at it. The pragmatist theory (but not a Theory) of meanings and truth is designed to slide seamlessly into the body of beliefs and methods that find their best expression in the sciences. The specific and concrete interactions provide the material for criticizing and evaluating our meanings. The project of identifying the concept of truth with a theory is dropped and replaced with specific theories of overlapping domains and specific cases. To say this another way, if P is true, then there is successful prediction and control when employing P. But I do not claim that if there is successful prediction and control when employing P, then P is true. This further statement would deny that pragmatism could be wrong, which would be very unpragmatic. Here is Dewey on correspondence:

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<sup>7</sup> I might say success forms the transcendental basis of truth, as long as it is understood that I use transcendental loosely in that biological success makes it possible for us to get at the truth, but truth and success are not identical, nor is it the case that where there is truth there is always biological success. The relationship is not one of necessity, but one of actuality.

...[M]y own view takes correspondence in the operational sense it bears in all cases except the unique epistemological case of an alleged relation between a "subject" and an "object"...(Dewey, 1941, pp.178)

Dewey is arguing that the pragmatist theory of meaning describes how human beings living in a natural world grasp the truth, but no abstract or general relationship between mind and world can be articulated. Again, the pragmatist theory of truth does not exhaust the truth predicate, but it does summarize the sorts of interactions that we actually use to grasp the world.

Dewey seems to avoid using the term "truth" often and instead opts for "warranted assertability". The crucial portion for Dewey, I think, was articulating the ways in which we get at the truth in this world. Dewey rightly sensed that the truth predicate in and of itself should be left alone. Perhaps this explains why Dewey did not often speak of truth, because employing it would sidetrack discussion away from what was most crucial for Dewey and into a fruitless discussion of the essence of the word "truth". This explanation allows us to see Dewey as holding onto truth while jettisoning a total theory of Truth.<sup>8</sup>

## Foundations

For a pragmatist, nothing is sacred. All commitments are fallible through and through. But this does not mean that any belief is as expendable as any other. Some beliefs are more foundational than others. A belief's degree of foundationality is measured by the importance its revision would have for other beliefs. This is a description of foundational beliefs, but it is not a reason why we should think that one belief is more foundational than another. The epistemic reasons appear when we reflect upon the effects of revision. For example, it is not clear what would be left of our life as rational beings if we had to give up our beliefs regarding mathematics, probability or how to form intelligible sentences. We cannot imagine evidence that would lead us to abandon these tools. Such circumstances may exist, but we cannot intelligibly imagine what they would be. Again, given the naturalistic picture of the mind we can, loosely speaking, conceive of beings that have minds that do not conform to any sort of logic or mathematics we have, but we cannot imagine any further than that. As my discussion of Davidson suggests, other conceptual schemes may be, in some vague sense, possible, but we will never have any evidence of them, since we could not interpret these beings as using a language at all. If we must interpret others as using a grammar, having beliefs and desires etc., then these constraints on interpretation circumscribe the limits of what we ourselves could give up. Certainly every belief is revisable, but some of them are so foundational that we

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<sup>8</sup> Here is an interesting perspective from W.V.O. Quine on Dewey, Pierce and Neurath:

...let 'p' stand for a sentence to the effect that there were an even number of blades of grass in Boston Common at the inception of 1901. By excluded middle, p or not p; so, by disquotation, [Tarski's definition of truth: "Puppies are cute" if and only if puppies are cute.] 'p' is true or 'Not p' is true. Yet science in even the broadest sense--informed belief--takes no stand on either 'p' nor 'Not p', and never will.

In a naturalistic spirit, C.S. Pierce tried to warp the doctrinally transcendent concept of truth over into immanence by identifying truth with the limit that scientific progress approaches. This rests on optimistic assumptions, and worse. Neither the 'p' nor the 'Not p' of the example above would be approached by scientific progress at the most glorious imaginable extreme. And Pierce was never, to my knowledge, one to question the law of the excluded middle.

John Dewey proposed, in the interest of naturalism, simply to avoid the truth predicate and limp along with warranted belief. Otto Neurath in his last years took a similar line. But surely neither Dewey nor Neurath could have denied that the truth predicate is rendered crystal clear by disquotation, and presumably both philosophers subscribed to 'p or not p'. (Quine, 1993, pp. 78)

cannot conceive what evidence would force us give them up. Whereas for other less foundational beliefs, we can certainly imagine how they could become in need of revision.

In “Five Myths About Pragmatism or, Against a Second Pragmatic Acquiescence” Eric MacGilvray states:

Indeed, we can imagine a form of foundationalism in which premises are legitimately fixed for the purposes of a given inquiry even though they might conceivably be called into question in another context. This is not the same as saying that the premises in question are understood to be fallible; rather, the very question of their truth or falsehood must be suspended in order for inquiry to proceed at all (although the validity of further inquiry ultimately rest upon their truth). (MacGilvray, 2000, p. 492)

This view is half right. It is true that inquiry must as a practical matter assume certain premises in order for the investigation to start, but this is only a practical sort of suspension of belief. I suggest we view any and all premises at any time to be fallible, but that some are more fallible than others. We investigate the more fallible using the less. This is less apt to compartmentalize our beliefs and investigations into varying contexts with varying epistemic commitments, making it seem as though our epistemic commitments will vary at the start with our choice of investigations. It is best to remind ourselves that the ways in which we choose our investigations, and our methods of investigation, should have full access to all our other beliefs and their epistemic weights. Also, MacGilvray’s model is ambiguous as to whether there is a foundational structure to all the various contexts, even though within each context there is a foundational structure. But as I have argued, some premises are less optional for questioning than others, whatever the context.

None of what I have said about foundations is foundational in the a priori sense of course. We could be wrong; the evidence could change parts of the story, or the whole thing. But it is not clear at all what this evidence could be. As I mentioned above logic, math, and probability would be good candidates for some of the foundations. For the pragmatist, the naturalistic picture I have sketched throughout this paper would be just underneath. When the pragmatist asserts a philosophical theory about causality, meaning or truth or whatever, they will be based on the best scientific story of the world we have, the knowledge we cannot see how to give up. The standards of evidence for belief, and justification will vary upon how much error we are willing to tolerate, how much time we have for inquiry and how important the subject matter. A pragmatist theory will not be a priori, but if it is closely supported by our best information, it will be secure enough to use in clarifying our thoughts and actions. But the pragmatist view of things will be open to refutation by new evidence.

The pragmatist theory of meaning I have explicated is two-fold in its cash-value. It is an a posteriori description of what meanings for humans generally are, or intended to be. But within it is also a means to criticize our meanings, namely, testing for prediction and control. We can always test our own and others’ meanings because meanings are public, they are not stuck in the mind of the speaker. There is no general barrier to interpretation, just as there is no general bridge increasing shared meaning. The barriers and bridges are specific and contingent. And our success and failure at reaching agreement will be determined by specific and individual interactions rather than any general theory.

Fact/Value

In this section I hope to articulate how the pragmatist view of meaning and translation bears on the fact/value distinction. I will argue that attributing beliefs and values to others is necessary because they are needed to predict and understand the complex causal webs that compose rational beings. Increasing the number and kinds of interactions will help us dissipate disagreement since interactions are the fodder from which shared meaning grows. In these ways, facts and values are intertwined. However, I will also argue that keeping the fact value distinction alive allows us to formulate their relationship along with inquiry, instead of prior to it.

I take the debate about the fact/value dichotomy in the social sciences to be a debate between behaviorists and hermeneuticists (Rorty, 1981, pp. 574-81). The behaviorists contend that knowledge about humans is best secured by purging all evaluations from investigations. Meanings are operationalized in order to test these meanings and facilitate communication and clarity between investigators. Generalizations about humans and human institutions are generated and tested. On the other hand, hermeneuticists argue that the really important things about humans, (such as our individuality, the moral obligations we are owed, our histories and experiences) are lost if meanings are paired down to behaviors actually observed. That is, behaviorists miss what is most real and salient about humans. Also, the hermeneuticists believe the behaviorists' insistence on purging evaluations is a shell game. Evaluations, while not explicit, always operate in the background (Topper, 2000, pp. 511-513).

In "Method, Social Science and Social Hope" Richard Rorty articulates a vision of social science.<sup>9</sup> One of his arguments is that there is no workable distinction between predicting and controlling persons and understanding their true nature. Also, Rorty contends that science "...should contain descriptions which help one decide what to do." (Rorty, 1981, pp. 575). In support of this first claim, Rorty criticizes the Galilean idea that science works because it reads "...the language which nature itself uses.", in other words, the correspondence theory of truth (Rorty, 1981, pp. 570). I would prefer to argue for Rorty's first point as a consequence of the pragmatist theory of meaning. The true nature of a thing is the cause and effect relations that it has on everything else. The metaphysics of naturalism, combined with the pragmatist meaning, gives us all there can be to a thing's true nature. Rorty is right to question the distinction between giving "Galilean-style generalizations" and "a 'teleological' vocabulary" as he states, "The idea that explanation and understanding are opposed ways of doing social science is as misguided as the notion that microscopic and macroscopic descriptions of organisms are opposed ways of doing things." (Rorty, 1981, p. 575). But then Rorty goes on to imply that while the two are somehow compatible, behaviorism is good for prediction and control, while the "macroscopic" teleological interpretation is evaluative. "In the case of evaluating human character, the vocabulary of stimulus and response is beside the point (Rorty, 1981, p. 575).

The pragmatic theory of meaning I defended above gives us good reason to think we can and should attribute meanings and values to subjects. The reason why such attributions are warranted, and mandatory, is the vastly increased powers of prediction and control that result from attributing meaning and values to subjects. For a complete understanding of persons, meanings and values are essential, but this move is justified by the fact that such attributions often describe real casual networks that other explanatory levels cannot accurately describe. However, there is one way of arguing for a collapse of the fact/value distinction that I think we should resist and Rorty seems to

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<sup>9</sup> Rorty, Richard Method, Social Science and Social Hope. Canadian Journal of Philosophy vol XI, No 4 569-588.

be hinting at. The argument is that in order to really understand people we must attribute meanings to them; beliefs and desires minimally. Since our facts about humans must include values, we are always evaluating when we attribute meanings and values. The anodyne to this reasoning is to simply recognize that just because we must take a holistic stance when understanding humans does not mean that we must evaluate what they are doing. It just means that we must treat persons as more than collections of atoms, or a bundles of responses to stimuli. The fact that we must attribute teleological terms to humans in order to understand them does not mean that we must or always take the next step in evaluating what people do as good or bad. For just because it may be correct to say, "The subject desires the reward and believes it will obtain it by pressing the button. And given the subjects' other desires and beliefs what she ought to do or what is rational for her to do is press the button." it does not follow that we must believe it would be good for the subject to press the button. That is, if the subject likes to torture puppies, even though we can step in their shoes and understand what would make sense for them to do, given their previous puppy torturing behavior, our final evaluation can be negative or neutral. It seems clear to me that we are often able to interpret other humans without importing or exporting our own values onto them.

If we take the second step and make a further ethical judgment from the facts of our investigations (and here, the values of the subjects are included in the facts) that it would be good for us to do x, this further recommendation outruns the evidence we have collected in the investigation. This space between the two, the space between the evidence we have collected and what recommendations we take from the evidence is the space for debate and criticism. Our facts must inform our values, but the important thing to notice is that just as the "meanings as causal webs" can be used by the social scientist in their investigations, so it can be used again to evaluate any further moral claims about what it would be good for us to do.

So, if the pragmatist position is correct, recognizing the need to attribute values etc. to humans to fully understand them does not collapse the fact/value distinction. For this way of collapsing it sets up a connection that is unwarranted by the fact that our values can infect our attribution of meaning to subjects. But it is clear no such general connection exists. Only by the ambiguousness of "evaluate" is there a necessary connection between the attributing values and valuing. The pragmatist theory of meaning does not assert if and when any specific attribution of meanings to a subject is warranted, but neither does it allow for a blanket linguistic connection that attributing values entails internalizing them. However the pragmatist theory of meaning does suggest a method for the warranted attribution of meaning, the success of predicted behavior between subject and object.

I started this section with Richard Rorty's view on the relationship between facts and values. Here is Richard Rorty again, who thinks that actually, there is no relation to be articulated:

It is a mistake to think that when we know how to deal justly and honorably with a person or a society we thereby know how to predict and control him or her or it, and a mistake to think that ability to predict and control is necessarily an aid to such dealing. (Rorty, 1981, pp. 576)

In the quote above Rorty contends that there may be no connection between his two conditions, between prediction and control and deliberation about what to do. John Dewey, I think, would not agree with this position. For it gives license for ethics to be formulated in absence of what humans and their relationships to each other and the world are like. In its extreme it allows for ethics to be formulated *de facto a priori*. For Dewey, ethics will be formed by interactions with the world, whether

or not the persons involved admit the a posteriori connection or not. So, Dewey would argue that we should make these connections explicit, rather than allowing them to tacitly run rampant behind the scenes (Dewey, 1910b). If values are rules for action, we should be very concerned with the nature of the world in which we are acting. Technically, Rorty is right that there is no necessary connection between how to treat someone and predicting and controlling them. My guess is that Rorty's lack of any sort of foundations (including omission of earlier pragmatists' theory of meaning) makes him nervous about making any sort of connection between prediction and control, and ethics, since he would see such a connection as being an implementation of the correspondence theory of truth. But I contend that the pragmatist theory of meaning is what can give us the connection between knowing about people and knowing how to treat them, without any a priorist overtones. Acknowledging that there is no a priori connection between facts and values is to ignore the robust a posteriori connection between the two. Since our values are always based (whether we acknowledge it or not) on the causal web of the world, the more we investigate the world and integrate these facts with our ethical reflections the better off we will probably be. What Rorty misses, at least in this article, is that the pragmatist theory of meaning is the conceptual tool that allows us to criticize both our facts and values, without any dogmatism.

In this last section I hope to show that John Dewey is amiable to the points I have been making and disarm some ambiguous interpretations of Dewey. Here is one passage where Dewey is discussing the relationship of facts and values:

The notion that the findings of science are a disclosure of the inherent properties of the ultimate real, of existence at large, is a survival of the older metaphysics. It is because of injection of an irrelevant philosophy into interpretation of the conclusions of science that the latter are thought to eliminate qualities and values from nature....Drop the conception that knowledge is knowledge only when it is a disclosure and definition of the properties of fixed and antecedent reality; interpret the aim and test of knowing by what happens in the actual procedures of scientific inquiry, and the supposed need and problem vanish. (Dewey, 1929, p. 83)

I think we can interpret Dewey here as saying that the outcomes of our investigations do not impinge on the other things such as qualities and values that we experience. For talk about qualities and values are things that are real that must be included in a full picture of reality, as I argued above.

A related way to understand Dewey here is to say that reductions do not make that which is reduced unreal. If, after careful investigation, the functioning of a blood cell is reduced to its parts, this does not make the cell unreal. For what a cell is, is what it does. Explaining how a cell does what it does is to say how its parts function together. The meanings that describe the parts and how they fit together will be the meaning of the whole cell. Only those longing for a mystery will fear that a reduction undercuts existence. Practically, it will never be useful to describe humans in terms of the positions of atoms. Reductions will be piecemeal and there will often be legitimate worries that the reductions do not capture everything they claim to. The reason why values and meanings are real is because they often accurately describe causal structures. These levels of explanation can offer much greater predictive power than physics to predict what people do. Even if physics could more accurately predict people than desire/belief models, we could simply modify our models to fit the new predictions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As a side note, I would argue that the pragmatist project runs into trouble if the vocabularies of the sciences aren't in principle translatable. Since the pragmatist world is just the causal nexus, it would seem that the meanings at one level must be thought to jive with the meanings at the other.

Here is another passage from Dewey on facts and values:

...[I]t leaves untouched the question as to whether scientific knowledge has power to modify the ends which men prize and strive to attain. It is proved that the findings of science—the best authenticated knowledge we have—add only to our power to realize desires already in existence? Or is this view derived from some previous theory about the constitution of human nature? Can it be true that desires and knowledge exist in separate non-communicating compartments? (Dewey, 1989, p. 107)

Dewey is stating that there is an interaction between our investigations and our values. We should expect our values to change given new facts, since our values, whether we acknowledge it or not, are based upon such interactions with the world, according to pragmatist metaphysics and meaning. And as the evidence comes in, we can expect our meanings to change in accordance (hopefully) to this evidence. We should be aware of and plan for these interactions. Since we are material beings, and we gain knowledge by interaction with the environment, every truth of science occurs within the causal nexus of the mind/world. But not all differences make a difference everywhere. So, changes in our stockpile of facts may not change our values, but it often does. Nor do we know in advance how our values will change. This is the crucial point about why the fact/value distinction in some form or other is necessary, since we don't know in advance of our inquiry how our values will change, the fact value distinction allows us to see the open endedness of the changes that our investigations will have on our values.

On the other side of the equation, namely how our values influence the facts, we can borrow a distinction from Robert Proctor. A plausible interpretation of Dewey's vision of fact/value interaction is that our values interact with science in terms of its neutrality rather than its objectivity. Science is an octopus that shoots its arms out in various directions. It is not a sphere that expands evenly. Science can be objective, but it is not neutral, "Counterinsurgency theorists know how to manipulate populations in revolt, but the fact that their knowledge is goal-oriented does not mean it doesn't work" (Proctor, 1991, pp. 10). In this sense, since our values determine the choice of our investigations, changes in our values will change the facts we arrive at. But whatever facts we arrive at, they are objective.

Here is an ambiguous interpretation of Dewey from Alfonso Damico:

Conceptualized as a problem solving activity, knowing entails facts and values, analysis and advocacy...the political scientist cannot avoid questions of values, since he cannot get the problem fully stated without taking account of them. (Damico, 1974, p. 202)

Where and what we choose to investigate will be decided by values, (even if we decide to study something randomly, for the purpose of building a store of possibly useful facts) but statements like this need to be disambiguated. If Damico is saying that we cannot articulate problems without attributing values to subjects, then I would agree, but as I argued above attributing goals to humans is not optional if you want to predict and communicate with them. Again holding our interpretations to actual and possible subject/world interactions does not destroy the objectivity of facts. If Damico is saying that values (whether the political scientist's, or someone else's) will determine the choice of study, again I agree. However, if Damico is saying that values in some way determine what facts result from inquiry, then I would disagree. It is possible to test our meanings to see if we have prediction and control (even in our teleological terms we attribute to others). We have a method to find the truth independent of our values. We can say this while holding that

different values would have pushed us towards a different investigation where we could have ended with different, but still objective, facts.

Here is another interpretation of John Dewey: “Dewey insists that the interpretive activity of the inquirer must play a role in recovering the meaning of any fact, in order for it to play an intelligible role in inquiry. (Festenstein, 2001, pp. 735). In the passages from the *Public and Its Problems* that Festenstein is citing, Dewey is arguing the objects of inquiry can change as an effect of that inquiry, which is much the same point Topper discusses below (Dewey, 1954, pp. 6-7; Topper, 2000, pp. 527). Although again it is not entirely clear what the author means. If Festenstein means that humans beings are limited and must pick and choose their investigations and that the specific nature of these investigations are determined by values, but that the resulting facts of the investigations are often objective, then I would agree. If we take a stronger reading such that differing values gives us differing facts that are incommensurable, then I would demure.

Topper points out a real difference between the natural sciences and the social sciences, that there is an extra layer of interpretation when dealing with self-interpreting agents. Theories of agents and objects that are made up of agents can change when they understand the theory, possibly making a true theory false (Topper, 2000, pp. 527). Social science’s investigations involve a much greater amount of contingency and mutability and context-dependence. But while this aspect of social science adds another level of complexity, it does not signal a difference of kind, only a difference in degree. For the changes in meaning that occur in humans when they learn about a theory that describes them will still be based on causal interactions, and our later interpretations must take the new meanings into account. The shelf life of theories will be shorter, the generalizations less general than in say, physics, but the theories are still tested in the same manner of physics, by paying attention to experience, and adjusting theories to match. This does not tell us that facts cannot be objective. It only tells us that social inquiry must be sensitive to the scope of its claims.

Perhaps the pragmatist can propose a compromise. The hermeneuticist will accept the pragmatist theory of meaning, that there is nothing more to human meaning than that web of cause and effects and our dispositions to act in these webs. They can still criticize the behaviorists if they attempt wholesale reductions, for their meanings, based on scientific investigations, will realistically never be the whole of any meaning. The behaviorist in turn will promise to think more about how values influence how they code for behavior. Operationalizing can make meanings more explicit and ripe for fruitful criticism, but the reduction to operations needed to make exactness possible will truncate the meanings employed. That is, in order to be the basis of action, behaviorists’ meanings will have to be integrated back into the fold of our more robust everyday meanings where we reason about means and ends. The thread all should agree on is the pragmatist theory of meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Objectivity, the separation of facts from value, is the ability to predict and control, to successfully use objects and persons in the world. Values will determine the direction of our investigations. Values can also warp our meanings by ignoring contrary evidence or highjacking inquiry for other

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<sup>11</sup> Also, both sides can acknowledge the underlying problem that has created the fact/value controversy. The problem is that we need to create and improve institutions and procedures that allow democracies to communicate their values to scientists and allow these scientists to fruitfully and accurately report back to the democracies on how to further or change these values.

purposes. But once we properly distinguish the role values play, we can use the pragmatist theory of meaning as a tool to test whether our meanings accord with the interactions we have with the world. The testing of meanings has truth as its direction, but this testing is open ended and no recipe for its proper completion can be articulated. Our everyday beliefs about meanings are shortcuts that are incomplete and impossible to fully elicit through prediction of speech and behavior. But if we accept the pragmatist theory of meaning we can investigate more fruitfully when we disagree, or when we need more information on which to base our actions. The need to attribute full-blooded beliefs and desires to subjects does not destroy the fact/value distinction, for desires and beliefs are tools that give us successful prediction and interaction i.e. all there is to knowing any person or thing.

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