

---

USING THE “R” WORD AGAIN:  
PRAGMATISM AS QUALIFIED RELATIVISM

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon  
University of Tennessee

---

In 1996 Christine McCarthy tried to rescue pragmatism from an association with relativism in her PES paper.<sup>1</sup> McCarthy defined relativism as relying on a view of reality as a function of human belief and truth as a function of human practice. Her rescue plan involved tying Peirce’s ontological realism to Dewey’s pragmatic epistemology. I write this paper in an effort to further explore pragmatism’s association with relativism, not to rescue it from relativism but rather to highlight how aspects of the classic pragmatists’ positions support qualified relativism. I agree with McCarthy, that Peirce does not embrace a relativistic view, due to his ontological realism. However, Peirce’s pragmatic method and fallibilism were adopted by both James and Dewey without their embracing Peirce’s ontological realism, thus allowing them to represent more relativistic views. I caution, though, that the relativism we find in James’s and Dewey’s pragmatism is not a vulgar, naive relativism, as it is regularly portrayed by more traditional philosophers, but rather a qualified relativism similar to what many feminist epistemologists present today. ‘Qualified relativism’ is even misleading as a term if it reifies a relativism/absolutism binary logic, for James, Dewey, and current feminist epistemologists share in common a desire to dissolve an either/or approach to logic in favor of a both/and approach. I plan to demonstrate that James and Dewey are helpful allies for feminists, and Peirce can be credited with offering some assistance. In the process, I hope my discussion will help to answer criticisms labeled against pragmatists and feminist epistemologists as relativists by further clarifying what is meant by *qualified relativism* and expanding on a both/and approach to logic.

CLASSIC PRAGMATISTS AS QUALIFIED RELATIVISTS<sup>2</sup>

*Charles Sanders Peirce*

C. S. Peirce is credited by William James as being the father of pragmatism, which Peirce later renamed pragmaticism in order to distinguish his ideas from more relativistic approaches such as James’s.<sup>3</sup> For Peirce, human beings are fallible, limited, contextual beings who can not trust our ideas or our experiences to lead us to certain Truth. Thus previous philosophers’ assumptions concerning epistemic agency are brought into question by Peirce and his theory of *fallibilism*. Peirce suggests that since all of us are fallible individuals, we need to work with others, as a scientific community of rational inquirers, to help further our knowledge and understanding. He does not describe “others” (as nonexperts) as needing to be necessarily included in the discussion for not everyone has the background knowledge necessary to do the investigating. Peirce

wants philosophy to act like science and co-operate, repeat, and test our observations. He wants philosophy to use severe but fair examination, and use suitable technical nomenclature (single definitions which are universally accepted), where a rationally false step is rarely taken.<sup>4</sup>

Peirce’s pragmatism is not a theory of Truth, but of meaning. Peirce postulates Truth to be something we are emerging toward, in the future. Each generation of scholars work to understand what is Truth as much as they can, and they pass that understanding on to the next generation, who continues the work, etc. “[T]rue opinion must be the one which they would ultimately come to.”<sup>5</sup> He suggested the last person on Earth will know all the Truth, at the end of time. “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is real. That is the way I would explain reality.”<sup>6</sup> It is Peirce’s belief that there will be a final, permanent set of beliefs that are True, there is a resistant reality of material objects that exists external to us and independent of our sense experiences.

Peirce is clear that reality is not dependent on what any of us individually believe, however he adds that “the reality of that which is real does depend on the real fact that investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief of it.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, in answer to possible concerns that his description of reality makes reality dependent of thoughts, Peirce says: “But the answer to this is that, on the one hand, reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it; and that, on the other hand, though the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks.”<sup>8</sup> This postulation of an independent, objective reality is how Peirce escapes relativism, as McCarthy rightly point out in “When you know it and I know it, what is it we know?” However, Peirce’s suggestion that we cannot be sure we have a final understanding of this reality opens up the possibility of a more relativized view.

It is ironic that Peirce’s pragmatic method and his concept of fallibilism is what first inspired Dewey and James to question distinctions between subject/object, knower/known, and relativism/absolutism. For, Peirce’s ontological realism caused him to strive to separate himself from his fellow pragmatists. Perhaps we can better understand the difference between non-vulgar absolutism and qualified relativism if we further explore the ontological differences between Peirce, James, and Dewey. My argument is that their ontological views affect their epistemological theories, and vice versa. We will find that the one pragmatist McCarthy left out of her discussion, James, offers us clear guidelines for distinguishing non-vulgar absolutism from qualified relativism. James shows us how the absolutist/relativist distinction dissolves with his theory of radical empiricism. Also, McCarthy falsely associates Dewey’s ontology with Peirce’s

---

instead of James's. I turn to James, and Dewey to further examine their ontological differences from Peirce and how these differences effect their concepts of truth(s).

*William James*

Peirce's idea of Truth as an emerging absolute which demands of us endless investigating changes in the hands of other pragmatists, such as his friend William James. In James's hands Truth becomes truths, which are relative to an individual's situation.<sup>9</sup> James followed Peirce's radical lead of incorporating contingency and revision into a theory of truth, yet he unties his theory of truth from Peirce's view of the evolutionary process of inquiry toward Truth and his assumption that Truths are objectively real.

James postulates with Pierce an end of Truth but knows that this is just a belief. For James: "To say something is true is to say that it is satisfactory."<sup>10</sup> In *Pragmatism* James italicizes the following definition of truth: "*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.*"<sup>11</sup> Truth grows and expands in James's hands, and takes on a changing, relational quality. Truth means that ideas (which are themselves just parts of our experience) become true in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience. "The pragmatist, therefore, does not ask with what true ideas agree but what concrete difference in actual life an idea's being true will make."<sup>12</sup> James said:

Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The 'facts' themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them.<sup>13</sup>

Or, put another way: "(T)ruth is only our subjective relation to realities."<sup>14</sup>

Seigfried argues that James's appeal to the concrete situation does not make him "an unbridled relativist" as others portray him.<sup>15</sup> In James's own time he was criticized for emphasizing the subjective side of truth and ignoring the objective side. However, James went to great length to refute rationalism and to show that "the rationalist belief in rigor and finality is a chimera." As Seigfried points out: "There is no loss in substituting tentative for absolute standards if absolute standards are impossible."<sup>16</sup> "The charge of subjectivism can be sustained only by clinging to the dogmatic view of reality characteristic of rationalism, which was already refuted by him (James)."<sup>17</sup> James's response to what he called slanderous criticisms of relativism by asking: "Pent in, as the pragmatist more than any one else sees himself to be, between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense

---

around him, who so well as he feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations?”<sup>18</sup>

According to James we call “knowledge” or “truth” ideas that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. True ideas are ones we have resolved and no longer doubt. “(T)ruth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process; the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*.”<sup>19</sup> James’s view is Peirce’s without the assumption of Truth at the end of time, without an assumption of universality. “For James, pragmatism is a proposal which is vindicated in a range of areas of application by its varied fruits. For Peirce, on the other hand, it is a technique which is to be defended by showing that it helps us to achieve a definite purpose: making scientific progress.”<sup>20</sup>

James defends his epistemological theory with the help of a complimentary ontological theory, which he calls *radical empiricism*. James shows us how his theory of radical empiricism releases us from the exclusive, binary logic to which Peirce appears to want to cling.

In *The Meaning of Truth* James defines *radical empiricism* thus:

Radical empiricism consists first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion. The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms of experience. The statement of fact is that the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves. The generalized conclusion is that therefore the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience.<sup>21</sup>

In *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James describes his radical empiricism this way:

There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a function in experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. That function is *knowing*.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, we find James describes a relational ontology that begins as a unity, not as separate entities. James’s calls his unity “primal stuff” or “pure experience,” the *thatness* of being. With his radical empiricism, knowing is therefore easily explained as “a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter.”<sup>23</sup> There is only one primal stuff or material in the

---

world, a stuff of which everything is composed. James's radical empiricism moves to get rid of dualisms in reality. For him, experience has no inner duplicity. Experience just is, in its pure *thatness*. Experience is subjective and objective, it is private and public, it is internal and external, it is thought and thing. What we do with pure experience, when we categorize and separate it and create lines of order for it, is by way of addition, not subtraction to pure experience.<sup>24</sup> Experience can serve different functions, and may be different kinds. When it is taken in different contexts, in different associations, it plays different parts. Thus, in a binary logic experience is forced to be either absolute or relativistic, either universal or particular. However, with James' radical empiricism we understand that it is not contradictory to say that experience is both absolute and relative, it is both particular and universal. This is the tremendous insight James has to offer, which present day pragmatists such as Seigfried and Rorty have been able to use to their advantage. It is an insight that Dewey was able to take advantage of as well and James's ontology is what helps to distinguish Dewey's pragmatism from Peirce's. Let us turn now to a look at Dewey.

*John Dewey*

If we turn to Dewey's work, we find James's credited influence in Dewey's concept of experience. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey describes experience as having an active and passive element, trying and undergoing. "We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return; such is the peculiar combination."<sup>25</sup> Experience is not primarily cognitive, but "the *measure of the value* of an experience lies in the perception of relations or continuities to which it leads up. It includes cognition in the degree in which it is cumulative or amounts to something, or has meaning."<sup>26</sup> Experience, for Dewey, means seeing connections, rather than the formation of ideas. Experience is the perception of relations, especially the relations between our actions and their empirical consequences. This seeing of connections is the necessary ingredient in acquiring knowledge. Experience involves learning, it is not mere action, as it involves the connecting of doing with something which is undergone in consequence.

In *Experience and Nature* Dewey describes experience this way: "Experience is not a veil that shuts man off from nature ... but rather a growing progressive self-disclosure of nature itself."<sup>27</sup> Again, as Dewey describes experience it is:

a double-barrelled word ... it includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine - in short, processes of *experiencing* ... It is "double-barrelled" in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains both in an unanalyzed totality.<sup>28</sup>

---

Thus, Dewey follows James’ lead and embraces a unity, a totality, a relational ontology. What happens to Peirce’s idea of *fallibilism* in Dewey’s hands? We can explore what happens by turning to Dewey’s concept of ‘warranted assertability.’ Dewey accepts Peirce’s idea of Truth as “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate.” In his book, *Logic*, he credits Peirce as the source of his ideas concerning logic.<sup>29</sup> Because he takes seriously Peirce’s claim that we will never know this Reality, it is a futuristic Ideal, this causes Dewey to distinguish between ontological Truth (the nature of truth) and epistemic validity (the test of truth).

As Dewey described logic, it is not separate from inquiry, it is embedded in the contextuality of inquiry. “...(A)ll logical forms (with their characteristic properties) arise within the operation of inquiry and are concerned with control of inquiry so that it may yield warranted assertions.”<sup>30</sup> In Dewey’s hands “...logical theory is rendered subservient to metaphysical and epistemological preconceptions, so that interpretation of logical forms varies with underlying metaphysical assumptions.”<sup>31</sup>

Dewey discusses the ambiguity that exists with the terms “settled belief” (“the settled condition of subject-matter, together with readiness to act in a given way, when, if, and as, that subject-matter is present in existence”) and “knowledge” (“that which satisfactorily terminates inquiry,” and “the product of competent inquiries”).<sup>32</sup> If we used these terms in these ways, he could embrace their use. Knowledge as the end of inquiry is a truism, a tautology. But, because people attach metaphysical and epistemological assumptions to what they mean by knowledge, so that it comes to mean a fixed eternal end, which is “apart from connection with and reference to inquiry” he suggests the use of a different term which is free from the ambiguity of *belief* and *knowledge*. This term is “warranted assertion.”<sup>33</sup>

When knowledge is taken as a general abstract term related to inquiry in the abstract, it means “warranted assertibility.” The use of a term that designates a potentiality rather than an actuality involves recognition that all special conclusions of special inquiries are parts of an enterprise that is continually renewed, or is a going concern.<sup>34</sup>

Dewey rejects any correspondence or coherence theory of Truth. He argues that what we need to focus on is the agreement process that we use to try to establish epistemic claims. Focusing on the agreement process, inquiry, helps us understand that the testing of truth is a social practice. To determine whether our ideas are reliable and worthy of action, we must look at how we warrant our assertions. As fallible, contextual human beings, the only truths we have access to are derived through our own error-prone yet self-correcting procedures. Even our logical forms are developed from within our own contextuality. Therefore,

---

our truth claims are forced to be tentative and revisable, and any argument for Truth as corresponding to reality, or as coherence, must fall back on warranted assertability in practice.

Thus, we call “knowledge” or “truth” by “warranted assertability” what we can assert to the best of our abilities, based on our best efforts to consider all options and solve all doubts so that we can say that what we assert is warranted by our best evidence, based on our best criteria. Or, as James put it, until we are satisfied. Dewey’s and James’s pragmatic views are not a form of vulgar relativism (also called strong relativism, radical relativism, or the view from everywhere), as they are often accused of, nor are their views as absolute as Peirce’s qualified universal view. We can describe Peirce as offering a non-vulgar absolutism, for he clearly recognizes historical contingency and contextuality, the fallibility of inquirers, and the need to provide a method for achieving revisability of knowledge-claims. Peirce insists on the need for continual critical assessment of epistemological criteria that are corrigible, and he turns to the scientific method and logic to fulfill that need. Yet, Peirce preserves a final grounding of knowledge claims in his postulation of real existents and the “external permanency,” which exists independent of human thought. Peirce offered a theory of synechism, which was “intended to connect the real--... with what is ‘destined’ to be believed as a consequence of the continuity of experimental inquiry.”<sup>35</sup> McCarthy rightly labels Peirce’s view “pragmatic realism.” Unfortunately, Peirce’s (and McCarthy’s) hold on to a destined reality that is mind-independent points us back to the binary logic of absolutism/relativism.

Dewey and James present qualified relativistic views that aim to dissolve the absolute/relative distinction. They help us understand that depending on one’s own ontological leanings, it is possible to find support for absolutism as well as relativism in classic pragmatism. However, to make that one’s focus for argumentation is really to miss the tremendous insight pragmatism has to offer. Although Dewey and James spent significant energy in their own lifetimes trying to clarify this point, it seems to be one that continually resurfaces, for the desire for a separate Reality and transcendental Truth runs long and deep in Euro-western philosophical traditions.

#### AVOIDING CHARGES OF VULGAR RELATIVISM

Let me recap: qualified relativists embrace Peirce’s fallibilism, James’s truths as satisfactory relations, and Dewey’s warranted assertability. However, qualified relativists untie their fallibilism from ontological realism, embracing instead a radical empiricism. Qualified relativists describe knowers as socially embedded and embodied inquirers who are limited in their knowing by their environment, which includes their experiences with the world around them and

---

each other, and their human capacities. Because people are social beings formed in relationships, those relationships will cause people to be formed certain ways and not others and will limit the possibilities of knowing. As Jane Flax points out, “(t)he boundaries of knowledge are our experiences and our human abilities.”<sup>36</sup> Qualified relativists: “assume ... that knowledge is the product of human beings. Thinking is a form of human activity which cannot be treated in isolation from other forms of human activity including the forms of human activity which in turn shape the humans who think. Consequently, philosophies will inevitably bear the imprint of the social relations out of which they and their creators arose.”<sup>37</sup> They argue that our ontological and epistemological premises are like a net of beliefs woven together which become partially self-validating, and which are greatly affected by our contextuality. Qualified relativists argue that Euro-western philosophy and science are both embedded within layers of contextuality which influence and limit philosophers’ and scientists’ theories and experiments continually.

Qualified relativists find that criteria for choosing ideas are fallible, as they are human constructions, and therefore subject to change and improvement. As Sandra Harding describes, “...the grounds for knowledge are fully saturated with history and social life rather than abstracted from it.”<sup>38</sup> Or, as Lorraine Code asserts: “theories that transcend the specificities of gendered and otherwise situated subjectivities are impotent to come to terms with the politics of knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> Feminists describe the criteria we use to help us settle our doubts similarly to the classic pragmatists, yet without the bias toward science that Peirce, James, and Dewey express. They place an emphasis on the social negotiating process that inquiry must go through, to help us reach satisfactorily (though usually temporary and tentative) conclusions. We continue to inquire, and we try to support our understandings with as much “evidence” as we can socially construct, qualified by the best criteria upon which we can agree. A qualified relativist grounds her claims “in experiences and practices, in the efficacy of dialogical negotiation and of action.”<sup>40</sup>

Qualified relativism should not be confused with vulgar relativism. A qualified relativist stresses that the construction of knowledge is social, interactive, flexible, and on-going. Yet we find that what I describe is different from Peirce’s non-vulgar absolutist view. I suggest that the difference lies in our ontology and logic, for Peirce remains clearly within the traditional Enlightenment paradigm. His desire to defend pragmatism against charges of relativism is based on an acceptance of a Real world independent of human influence, thus maintaining a split between the known and knowers and relying on a binary logic which Dewey and James worked hard to dissolve. James and Dewey offer us a way out of dualistic thinking, by embracing a concept of experience as an unanalyzable totality. Our analysis is what we add to pure experience. Experience can take on many shapes and forms, depending on its functions. We understand

---

experience in terms of its relations. What a qualified relativist proposes is nothing less than a transformation of the Enlightenment paradigm by dissolving the binary logic and the Realism that supports that paradigm. Qualified relativists embrace a unifying logic that describes the universe as pluralistic, in the sense of being open and unfinished. Yet qualified relativists (pragmatists, feminists, and postmodernists) can claim roots to their positions in Peirce, James, and Dewey, some of the very scholars McCarthy turns to for her pragmatic realism.

## NOTES

1. Christine McCarthy, "When You Know It, and I Know It, What Is It We Know? Pragmatic Realism and the Epistemological Absolute," in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 21–29, 21.
  2. This discussion is derived from Chapter Two of *Transforming Critical Thinking: Constructive Thinking* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
  3. Charles S. Peirce, "What pragmatism is," in *Values in an Universe of Chance: Selected writings of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1958).
  4. Ibid., 184-185.
  5. Ibid., "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 133–134.
  6. Ibid., 133.
  7. Peirce, (1933-58). *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 5. 409.
  8. Ibid., 5. 409.
  9. William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1909, 1975b).
  10. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 314.
  11. James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1907, 1975a), 97.
  12. Seigfried, *William James*, 293–294.
  13. James, *Pragmatism*, 108.
  14. James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 89.
  15. Seigfried, *William James*, 304.
  16. Ibid., 298.
  17. Ibid., 311.
-

18. James, *Pragmatism*, 111–112.
  19. *Ibid.*, 97.
  20. Christopher Hookway, “Logical Principles and Philosophical Attitudes: Peirce’s Response to James’s Pragmatism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth A. Putnam (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 159.
  21. James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 6–7.
  22. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912, 1976), 4.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
  25. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, MacMillan, 1916, 1966), 139.
  26. *Ibid.*, 140.
  27. John Dewey, “Experience and Nature,” in J. Boydston (Ed.). *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953, Vol. 1* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925, 1981): 1–326, 5.
  28. Dewey, Experience and Nature, 18.
  29. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1938).
  30. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
  31. *Ibid.*, 8.
  32. *Ibid.*, 7, 8.
  33. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
  34. *Ibid.*, 9.
  35. Ralph W. Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism: John Dewey’s Conception of Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 45.
  36. Jane Flax, “Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics,” in *Discovering Reality*, eds. Sandra Harding & Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Boston, London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), 249.
  37. *Ibid.*, 248.
  38. Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (NY and London: Routledge, 1993), 57.
-

39. Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 315.
40. Lorraine Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (NY and London: Routledge, 1993), 39.

