

The Theory of Nineteenth-Century American Pragmatism

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Received: 12 November 2023 ▪ Revised: 14 December 2023 ▪ Accepted: 19 December 2023

Abstract

The purpose of this overview is to give a short introduction to the ideas and activities of nineteenth-century American pragmatism theory. Pragmatism is a philosophical theory that sees thought as a tool and device for predicting, solving problems and planning action. The philosophy of pragmatism addresses the practical consequences of ideas by examining them in the light of human experience, so that the truth of a claim is determined by practical results and the utility it serves. Pragmatism began in the United States around 1870 by Charles S. Peirce. In addition to Peirce, philosophers such as William James and John Dewey who were members of the “Metaphysical Club” held at Cambridge University in the late 19th century (where the theory was formulated) helped to develop its principles. By reviewing the theory of pragmatism, we must concentrate on the Pragmatic Maxim, the rule for clarifying ideas, which for both Peirce and James, was the core of pragmatism. Another important idea in the theory is Skepticism and fallibilism. This idea claims, according to Peirce, that we should try to doubt propositions and keep them only if they are with absolutely certainty and there is no way to doubt them. The test of certainty, as Peirce points out, lies in the individual mind: trial by doubt is something each must do for himself, and the examination of our beliefs is guided by reflection on hypothetical possibilities: we cannot trust our perceptual beliefs. For example, because we cannot rule out the possibility that they were created by a dream or by evil scientists manipulating our minds. The more we try to avoid errors, the more likely we are to miss truths; And the more effort we put into searching for truths, the more likely we are to introduce errors. The doubt method may make sense in the special case where enormous weight is given to avoiding mistakes, even if it means losing truth. Once we recognize that we are making a practical decision about the relative importance of two good options, the Cartesian strategy no longer seems the only rational one. Inquiry, as already suggested, is pragmatic accounts of the normative standards to which we must act in arriving at beliefs about the world cast in terms of how we can conduct inquiries in a disciplined, self-controlled manner. That is, our ability to think about external things and constantly improve our understanding of them is based on our experience. It would be wrong to conclude that pragmatism is limited to the United States or that the only important pragmatist thinkers were Peirce, James, and Dewey. Richard Rorty has described his philosophy as “pragmatist” on several occasions – what pragmatists teach us about truth, he tells us, is that there is nothing very systematic or constructive to say about truth at all.

Keywords: American pragmatism, skepticism, fallibilism, other pragmatists.

1. Introduction: The pragmatist traditional school of thoughts

So far, we have concentrated on the pragmatist maxim, the rule for clarifying ideas that, for both Peirce and James, was the core of pragmatism. When we think of pragmatism as a philosophical *tradition* rather than as a maxim or principle, we can identify a set of philosophical views and attitudes which are characteristic of pragmatism, and which can lead us to identify as pragmatists many philosophers who are somewhat skeptical about the maxim and its applications. Some of these views *may* be closely related to the maxim and its defense, but we shall now explore them rather as distinctive characteristics of the pragmatist tradition. The first of the themes that we shall consider is epistemological, and it picks up on Hilary Putnam's claim that one mark of pragmatism is the combination of anti-skepticism and fallibilism.

1.1 *Skepticism and fallibilism*

The roots of the anti-skeptical strain can be found in an early paper of Peirce "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (EP1: 28-30). He identifies "Cartesianism" as a philosophical pathology that lost sight of the insights that were both fundamental to scholastic thought and also more suited than Cartesianism to the philosophical needs of his own time. The paper begins by identifying four characteristics of the sort of modern philosophy that is exemplified by Descartes' writings. In each case, Descartes self-consciously made a break with the scholastic tradition, and, in each case, the outlook that he rejected turns out to be the outlook of the successful sciences and to provide the perspective required for contemporary philosophy.

The first, and most important, of these characteristics was the "method of doubt": "Cartesianism teaches that philosophy must begin with universal doubt." We are to try to doubt propositions and we should retain them only if they are absolutely certain and we are unable to doubt them. The test of certainty, as Peirce next points out, lies in the individual consciousness: trial through doubt is something that everyone must do for him or herself. And the examination of our beliefs is guided by reflection on hypothetical possibilities: we cannot trust our perceptual beliefs, for example, because we cannot rule out the possibility that they are produced by a dream or by wicked scientists manipulating our brains (Hookway, 2012: chapters 2, 3). The initial pragmatist response to this strategy has several strands. It is a strategy that we cannot carry out effectively, and there is no reason to adopt it anyway. Peirce begins his response by claiming that any attempt to adopt the method of doubt will be an exercise in self-deception because we possess a variety of certainties which "it does not occur to us *can* be questioned."

What is produced will not be a "real doubt" and these beliefs will lurk in the background, influencing our reflection when we are supposed to be suspending judgment in them. Peirce urges that we should not "pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts." We should doubt propositions only if we have a real reason to do so. It is necessary to separate some different threads here.

First, there is something unnatural about the Cartesian strategy. Inquiries normally occur within a context: we address particular issues, relying on a body of background certainties that it does not occur to us to question. The Cartesian suggestion that we should begin by trying to doubt everything appears to be an attempt to step outside this context, relying upon no beliefs that we have not ratified through reflective inquiry. Sometimes we may have to question some of our assumptions, but our practice is not to do so unless there is a positive reason for this. Second, the Cartesian strategy requires us to reflect upon each of our beliefs and ask what reason we have for holding it – the skeptical challenges are then used to question the adequacy of these reasons. This is at odds with our normal practice. Many of our familiar certainties are such that we cannot offer any concrete reason for believing them, certainly not one that is wholly convincing. We tend to treat our established beliefs as innocent until "proved guilty." We need reasons for our beliefs

when we propose to change them, or when they have been challenged. It is doubt that needs a reason, and we trust our everyday beliefs until given a positive reason for doubting them. The mere lack of a conclusive reason for belief does not itself provide us with a reason for doubt. The Cartesian strategy adopts an unorthodox, revisionary understanding of *reason for belief* and *reason for doubt*.

Descartes, of course, might have conceded this, but responded that the revision is required because, once we allow error to enter our corpus of beliefs, we may be unable to escape from its damaging effects. His was a time of controversy about how we should go about fixing our opinions, and he was sensitive to the number of false beliefs he had acquired from his teachers. The pragmatist response here is to question some of his assumptions about how we reason and form our beliefs. First, Descartes' picture is too individualist and "to make single individuals absolute judges of truth is most pernicious." In sciences in which men come to agreement, when a theory has been broached, it is considered to be on probation until this agreement has been reached. After it is reached, the question of certainty becomes an idle one, because there will be no one left who doubts it. We individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the *community* of philosophers. (EP, 1: 29. Peirce also questions Descartes' understanding of reasoning, suggesting that he holds that we must rely on "a single thread of inference" that is no stronger than its weakest link: Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to proceed only from tangible premises which can be subjected to careful scrutiny, and to trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of anyone. Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected (EP, 1: 29). Where the Cartesian begins from the concern that unless we begin from premises of which we can be absolutely certain we may never reach the truth, the pragmatist emphasizes that, when we do go wrong, further discussion and investigation can hope to identify and eliminate errors.

The possibility of error provides us with reason to be "contrite fallibilists," aware that any of our opinions may, for all we know, require revision in the future, but it does not provide us with any reason for skepticism. The focus of epistemological inquiry should not be on showing how we can possess absolute certainty; instead, we need to understand how we can possess methods of inquiry that contribute to our making fallible progress. Inquiry is a community activity, and the method of science has a self-correcting character. Such are the checks and balances that we can be confident in our cognitive activities William James makes similar observations. In "The Will to Believe," he reminds us that we have two cognitive desiderata: we want to obtain truth; and we want to avoid error (James, 1897: 30). The desire for certainty is part of a perspective that gives little weight to the needs of practice. For the rationalist, "the operation of inquiry excludes any element of practical activity that enters into the construction of the object known." For the pragmatist, the needs of practice are allowed to contribute to the constitution of objects.

2. Inquiry

As has already been suggested, pragmatist accounts of the normative standards we should follow in arriving at beliefs about the world are cast in terms of how we can carry out inquiries in a disciplined, self-controlled way. They provide rich accounts of the capacities we must possess in order to inquire well and the rules, or guiding principles, that we should adopt. A canonical statement of this is found in Peirce's classic paper "The Fixation of Belief." Inquiry is a "struggle" to replace doubt with "settled belief" and Peirce argues that the only method of inquiry that can make sense of the fact that we are disturbed by inconsistent beliefs and that we should reflect upon which methods are *correct* is the "Method of Science." The method of science is an experimental method, and the application of the pragmatist maxim reveals how hypotheses can

be subject to experimental test. A knower is an agent, who obtains empirical support for her beliefs by making experimental interventions in her surroundings and learning from the experiences that her actions elicit. Peirce's writings provide a sophisticated and historically informed account of just how the method of science can work (Levi, 2012). Dewey's conception of inquiry, found in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* is richer and more radical (Smith, 1978: 98). He sees inquiry as beginning with a problem; we are involved in "an indeterminate situation." And inquiry aims for "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (Smith, 1978: 98). As John E Smith has put it, "Peirce aimed at 'fixing' belief, whereas Dewey aimed at 'fixing' the situation" (Smith, 1978: 98).

We begin in a situation where we don't know our way around, and inquiry comes to an end when we do. The "pattern of inquiry" that he describes is common to practical problem-solving, common-sense investigations of our surroundings, scientific inquiry, the information gathering of animals and so on. Dewey recognizes that when we first face a problem, our first task is to understand our problem through describing its elements and identifying their relations. Identifying a concrete question that we need to answer is a sign that we are already making progress. The continuities he finds between different kinds of inquiry is evidence of his naturalism and of his recognition that forms of scientific investigation can guide us in all areas of our lives. All the pragmatists, but most of all Dewey, challenge the sharp dichotomy that other philosophers draw between theoretical beliefs and practical deliberations. In some sense, all inquiry is practical, concerned with transforming and evaluating the features of the situations in which we find ourselves. Dewey's work developed these ideas about inquiry. Shared inquiry directed at resolving social and political problems or indeterminacies was central to his conception of the good life and to his account of the democratic ideal. Others, closer to Peirce than to Dewey, identify scientific inquiry as the model of democratic problem solving (Bernstein, 2010: chapter three; Talisse, 2008; Misak, 1999; Westbrook, 1991).

3. The pragmatist conception of experience

As is evident from the pragmatist maxim, pragmatism is a form of empiricism. Our ability to think about external things and to steadily improve our understanding of them rests upon our experience. However, the pragmatists all adopted accounts of experience and perception that were radically different from the views of earlier modern philosophers such as David Hume and Descartes (for example, Smith, 1978: chapter three). The established view linked experience to what is sometimes called "the given": we are the passive recipients of atomistic, determinate and singular sensory contents, the kinds of things that are sometimes called sense data. Experience provides the material for knowledge and conceptualization, but it does not itself have a content that is informed by concepts, practical needs, or anything else non-sensory.

4. Representations

Having discussed pragmatist emphases upon the activity of inquiry and the richness of experience, we should turn to their views about the nature of thought. It has been common for philosophers to assume that the content of a thought, judgment, or other mental state is a kind of intrinsic property that it possesses. Perhaps it offers a "picture" or "idea" of some state of affairs, and we can identify this content simply by reflecting upon the thought itself. All pragmatists have rejected this idea, and all have held that the content of a thought or judgment is a matter of the role it fills in our activities of inquiry. The content of a thought or belief is to be explained by reference to what we do with it or how we interpret it. I shall illustrate this by considering three particular pragmatist views.

First, all of the classic pragmatists identified beliefs and other mental states as *habits*. According to Peirce, our beliefs “Guide our desires and shape our actions” (EP, 1: 114). The content of a belief is not determined by its intrinsic phenomenal character; rather, it is determined by its role in determining our actions. This was reflected in Peirce’s formulations of his pragmatist maxim. In order to be clear about the content of a concept or hypothesis, we must reflect upon its role in determining what we should do in the light of our desires and our background knowledge. In Robert Brandom’s happy form of words, the philosopher “makes explicit” aspects of our practice that are implicit in our habits and dispositions. The role of tacit habits of reasoning and acting in fixing our beliefs and guiding our actions is a theme that recurs in the work of all of the pragmatists.

The second illustration concerns a passage in which James defended his account of truth by urging that it was the concept used in successful science. He identified the “traditional view” that, for early scientists, the “clearness, beauty and simplification” provided by their theories led them to think that they had deciphered authentically the eternal thoughts of the Almighty. By contrast, contemporary scientists held that “no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any of them may from some point of view be useful” (James, 1907: 33). A scientific theory was to be understood as “an instrument”: it is designed to achieve a purpose: “to facilitate action or increase understanding” (James, 1907: 33). For James and Dewey, this holds of all our concepts and theories: we treat them as instruments, as artefacts to be judged by how well they achieve their intended purpose. The content of a theory or concept is determined by what we should do with it.

The third illustration comes from Peirce’s general theory of signs, which offers an account of the contents of thoughts as well as of public signs and language. Peirce insisted that the sign-relation was *triadic*: a sign or thought is about some object because it is understood, in subsequent thought, as a sign of that object. The subsequent thought is its *interpretant*. In understanding or interpreting a sign, we will probably draw inferences from it, or undertake actions that are rational in the light of the sign and the other information we possess. Interpretation is generally a goal directed activity. In such cases, our action or the conclusion of our inference is the interpretant; interpretation is not primarily a matter of intellectual recognition of what a sign means. The theory is complex and I will not explore it further here, beyond emphasizing, once again, that the content of a thought is determined by the ways in which we can use it in inference and the planning of action.

5. Other pragmatists

It would be wrong to conclude that pragmatism was restricted to the United States or that the only important pragmatist thinkers were Peirce, James and Dewey. As is documented by Thayer, there were pragmatists in Oxford, in France and, especially, in Italy in the early years of the twentieth century (Thayer, 1968: part III; Baldwin, 2003: 88-89). Moreover, we can mention several other important American pragmatists, for example Josiah Royce. Commonly thought to be an idealist opponent of James and a critic of pragmatism, Royce increasingly came to be influenced by Peirce’s work on signs and on the community of inquirers and was acknowledged as a fellow pragmatist by Peirce himself. C. I. Lewis, the teacher of Quine and of several generations of Harvard philosophers developed a philosophy that was a sort of pragmatist Kantianism. Murray Murphey has identified him as “the last great pragmatist” (Murphey, 2005). In books such as *Mind and the World Order* (1929), he defended a pragmatist conception of the a priori, holding that our choices of laws of logic and systems of classification were to be determined by pragmatic criteria (Lewis, 1993; Murphey, 2005: chapters four and five). Of comparable importance was George Herbert Mead (Mead, 1934). Close to Dewey, Mead contributed to the social sciences, developing pragmatist perspectives upon the relations between the self and the community.

Dewey's longevity meant that pragmatism remained a philosophical force in the United States well into the twentieth century. The influx of philosophers from Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s – logical empiricists, members of the Frankfurt School, and others – led to Pragmatist ideas becoming marginalized in the mid-century by providing new and exciting ideas when the pragmatist tradition may have begun to grow stale. Even then it retained some force. The work of Frank Ramsey at Cambridge (Ramsey, 1926) in the 1920s developed Peirce's views on statistical reasoning and on inquiry in ways that provided fertile research programmers through much of the century, for example in the work of Isaac Levi at Columbia (Levi, 1999). As Russell Goodman (2002) has documented, Wittgenstein's later thought acquired a pragmatist flavor though his reading of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). And there was always a relatively small but lively group of scholars who strove to maintain the values of what was championed as a distinctive American philosophical tradition even when this tradition was largely ignored by the philosophical establishment. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, scholarly work on pragmatist philosophy increased in both quantity and quality, making possible an appreciation of the sophistication of the pragmatist philosophers and enabling readers to escape from the of familiar caricatures of the position. Lacking the space to discuss all aspects of these developments, I shall comment on just two or three leading philosophers who have allowed their reading of the pragmatists to shape their conception of philosophy (Misak (Ed.), 1999; Haack 1993; Kloppenber, 1996). Richard Rorty has described his philosophy as 'pragmatist' on a number of occasions. Where Peirce and Dewey – and even perhaps James – were engaged in working out systematic philosophical visions, Rorty treated "pragmatism" as something more negative. What pragmatists teach us about *truth*, he tells us, is that there is nothing very systematic or constructive to say about truth at all. In particular, this concept does not capture any systematic or metaphysical relation between our beliefs and utterances, on the one hand, and reality on the other. We can describe what we do with the word "true": we use it to express our endorsement of beliefs and sentences, and sometimes we might find it useful to express our fallibility by saying that some of our beliefs may not be true.

But, beyond talking about the rather trivial formal properties of the concept, there is nothing more to be said. He also uses what he describes as a "pragmatist" principle to show that the truth cannot be our aim when we inquire. This principle holds that we can only adopt something as an aim when we are able to recognize that it has been achieved: it must thus make a practical difference whether a proposition is true or not. And since we are fallible, we are never in a position to recognize that one of our beliefs is actually true – all we can recognize is that it meets standards of acceptance that are endorsed, for the time being, in our community (Rorty, 1991a: chapter one; 2000; Davidson, 2005: 7; Hookway, 2007). The consequentialist character of pragmatist ideas is also reflected in his account of how we can criticize and revise our view of the world. We should be free to propose new "vocabularies" – systems of classification and description. We do not test these vocabularies by seeing whether they enable us to discover *truths* or by showing that they can be read off the nature of reality. Instead, we evaluate them by seeing how they enable us to achieve our goals and formulate better and more satisfying goals (Rorty, 1995).

Hilary Putnam denies that he is a pragmatist because he does not think that a pragmatist account of truth can be sustained. Indeed, he shows little sympathy for the pragmatist maxim. However, he has written extensively on James, Peirce, and Dewey – often in collaboration with Ruth Anna Putnam – and he has provided insightful accounts of what is distinctive about pragmatism and about what can be learned from it (Putnam, 1994a). He has identified four characteristics of pragmatism: the rejection of skepticism; the willingness to embrace fallibilism; the rejection of sharp dichotomies such as those between fact and value, thought and experience, mind and body, analytic and synthetic etc.; and what he calls "the primacy of practice" (Putnam, 1994c). He appears to count as a pragmatist in the wider sense but not as a pragmatist in the narrow sense that requires acceptance of the pragmatist maxim. With the turn of the twenty first

century, he has made ambitious claims for the prospects of a pragmatist epistemology. After surveying the apparent failures of the original enlightenment project, and attributing them to the fact that enlightenment philosophers were unable to overcome the fundamental dichotomies mentioned above, he expresses the hope that the future might contain a “pragmatist enlightenment” (Putnam, 2004: 89-108). The rich understanding of experience and science offered by pragmatists may show how to find an objective basis for the evaluation and criticism of institutions and practices. He is particularly struck by the suggestion that pragmatist epistemology, by emphasizing the communal character of inquiry and the need to take account of the experiences and contributions of other inquirers, provides a basis for a defense of democratic values (Haack, 1993: 1180-202). This may be related to Rorty’s suggestion that pragmatists insist upon the priority of democracy over philosophy (Rorty, 1991b). Another symptom of a pragmatist revival is found in the work of Robert Brandom, in books such as *Making It Explicit*, and *Articulating Reasons*. Brandom’s philosophical interests are rather different from those of the classical pragmatists. Indeed, the classical pragmatists, of whom he is quite critical, do not evidently influence his work. The connection to pragmatism is that his approach to language is focused upon what we *do* with language, with our practices of making assertions and of challenging or evaluating the assertions of others. He joins the pragmatists in denying that *truth* is a substantial metaphysical property that can be possessed by some propositions and not by others, and in focusing upon how this kind of discourse has a role in our practices, upon how truth or reference makes a difference in practice.

6. Conclusion

Tatyana Petkova writes “How to live with the Other without any problems or contradictions? How does someone accept the Other – its religion, customs, culture without problems, and conflicts? Of course, the most tolerant is living on either side of a clearly marked line, but ... The idea of tolerance in both John Locke and Immanuel Kant is – to be able to accept the Other as it is. Against the backdrop of the globalizing world and all the challenges that arise from this process that led to the demolition of many of the boundaries typical of traditional societies, but also lead to the destruction of borders to the dangers of compelling modern human, placing him in a situation, living in a society labeled with a global risk. The idea that people living in Europe (and/or the greater part of the world), today after two world wars and a gradual global liberal democracy, are reasonable enough and is often refuted. Today we do not stop talking about pluralistic social spaces, civil society, modern democracies, but we often forget that in 1933 Adolf Hitler came to power, precisely through democratic elections. Today, with extreme we see factors, ideological waves and political factions, pushing for sharp manifestations of antisemitism, xenophobia, chauvinism, racism, sociopathism, etc. Tolerance – it is today one of the most problematic themes” (Petkova, 2019: 23-24).

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, more philosophers became ready to describe themselves as “pragmatists,” leading to new ways of articulating pragmatism and original ways in which philosophy can be shaped by pragmatist ideas. These “new pragmatists” include Huw Price (2013), Robert Brandom and Philip Kitcher. Their understanding of “pragmatism” is not always the same, but we shall describe some of the most important developments (Bacon, 2012: chapters 6, 7). First, what features do we look for in deciding whether a philosopher is a pragmatist? Most pragmatists embrace a form of naturalism, employing a methodology which uses the method of science and is open to exploring the different kinds of methods that are employed in different sciences. Although they are ready to move away from the views of the classical pragmatists, they will often be exploiting particular examples of pragmatic clarifications from Peirce, James, and Dewey. A good example of this is provided by Cheryl Misak’s use of what she calls “Peirce’s naturalist account of truth” (Misak, 2007: 69f). She insists that Peirce did not want to define pragmatism. Rather it is “the heart of pragmatism” that Peirce does not offer a

“transcendental” account of truth or a philosophical analysis. Rather than trying to identify the essence of truth, she claims, pragmatists try to describe the role of the concept in our practices. Thus, Peirce’s account of truth examines the relations between the concept of truth and notions such as belief, assertion, and inquiry. Her approach is thus naturalistic because it is a sort of anthropological investigation; and the result of the investigation is neither a necessary truth nor something that is established a priori. This adoption of pragmatism is accompanied by a rejection of a priori metaphysics and of intellectualist accounts of thought. Peirce grounds this on his pragmatic maxim, a logical rule that shows the emptiness of “concepts” which have no practical consequences. This rejection of a priori metaphysics is shared with Price, Brandom and other philosophers who embrace new forms of pragmatism. In similar vein, Kitcher’s “On the Role of Correspondence Truth” (Bacon, 2012: chapter 4) provides a clarification of truth which builds on William James’s view that true propositions are ones that enable us to function well, that function successfully as instruments. We have examined pragmatism in the narrow sense (the pragmatist maxim as a rule for clarifying concepts and hypotheses) and pragmatism in a wider sense. The latter involves a range of approaches to problems in epistemology, metaphysics and many other areas of philosophy that tend to display a broad common pattern. When pragmatism began, in the work of Peirce and James, pragmatism in the narrow sense was most important; while more recent manifestations of pragmatism have tended to give most weight to pragmatism in the wider sense. Many recent pragmatists are doubtful that a defensible form of the maxim can be found. However, the connections between the two are clear. The pragmatist maxim was first developed in the context of a fallibilist, broadly empiricist approach to the study of inquiry, and it is this approach to inquiry that is central to pragmatism in the wider sense. Brandom’s influential views introduce some different ideas. He focuses on the normative regulation of our practices, especially the practices involved in reasoning and cognitive activities. Rather than being influenced by the classical pragmatists, Brandom’s work shows the influence of his teacher Wilfrid Sellars and also his reading of Kant and some of the writings of Hegel. Rationality involves possessing the ability to recognize the force of reasons. The required connection with agency is manifested in the ways in which reasoning and deliberation are active activities PTER; and we can take responsibility for how well we deliberate and reason. In works like *Making It Explicit* (1994) he develops a systematic system of normative pragmatics which examines the rules that should guide the exercise of linguistic practices. His defense of naturalism resembles the anthropological approach of Misak: we understand our concepts by showing how they are used in our practices. Brandom also emphasizes the importance of the fact that we can adopt different vocabularies, adopting different ways of describing and reasoning in different contexts. This is reflected in Brandom’s distinct kind of naturalism. As well as forging a vocabulary for evaluating our reasons and participating in communal reasoning and discussion, he explores how one vocabulary can be understood as grounded in others, for example in the vocabulary of fundamental science. This does not conflict with our using other vocabularies, for different purposes. He follows Rorty in rejecting the aspiration to provide accurate representations of our surroundings. Ways of talking are not to be evaluated in terms of whether they accurately describe our surroundings; rather, they are evaluated by the by the virtues of the practices that are involved in our use of them.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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