

# Hilary Putnam and the Trajectory of Classical Pragmatism\*

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Shortly after Hilary Putnam made his turn to pragmatism in *Reason, Truth, and History*, he and Hartry Field recapitulated almost verbatim the moves that had directed the classical pragmatist tradition down the trajectory towards its midcentury demise. On the one hand, pragmatism takes the truth to be what in one way or another can be rationally established; on the other, there are a great many acknowledged truths—such as the lost details of the distant past, which figured into the Putnam-Field exchange—that it is not possible in principle to settle. As the classical pragmatists shifted their methodological commitments so as to recover one after another slice of the factual world, they found themselves maneuvered into a strategic dead end: that of attempting to integrate the incompatible approaches of competing philosophical schools.

There were a number of choices in the evolution of the tradition that could have been made in more than one way; its ending was accordingly not inevitable. Nonetheless, an underlying problem, which I will suggest was a persistent inability to distinguish methodological artefacts from legitimate

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results, drove those choices. The lesson is that the trap will have to be faced up to and dismantled, if a contemporary revival of the tradition, of the sort embarked on by Putnam, is to succeed.

## 1

Pragmatism was motivated in part by a diagnosis of the problems of British empiricism.<sup>1</sup> The apriori is what you know already, up front, without looking. Empiricists had mounted a sustained attempt to root out apriorism from philosophy, and to do this, they deployed an account of content, the so-called theory of ideas. Thoughts were the primary content bearers, and they were understood to be, roughly, mental pictures; such a picture had the content it had by resembling its object, in the first place by being copied from it—in something like the way that a portrait is copied from and resembles what is thereby its subject.<sup>2</sup> In their moral philosophy, pushback against the apriori made motivating mental states—variously, passions, pleasures and pains, desires, or preferences—into the benchmark for successful outcomes. What mattered, morally and personally, was as far as possible to produce those pleasant mental states, or satisfy those desires or preferences, with the extent to which you managed to do that being dubbed ‘utility’.<sup>3</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, it was clear that a great deal had gone wrong with the program.<sup>4</sup> And the pragmatists thought they knew why: the apriorism had not been thoroughly extirpated. In particular, both the empiricist theory of content and the foundations of moral theory were known

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<sup>1</sup>It was also a response to the pragmatists’ idealist contemporaries, but here I will stick with the empiricist side of the story. However, the British empiricism the pragmatists were trying to move past was not quite the British empiricism we remember. They read John Stuart Mill, whose metaphysics and epistemology have been written out of our curriculum, mostly by dint of the revisionist historiography of T. H. Green; instead of being counted as the fourth of the great British empiricists, Mill is known today primarily for his short popular writings in moral and political philosophy. And the pragmatists also read Mill’s protege, Alexander Bain, whom we remember, if at all, as the author of an early biography of Mill.

<sup>2</sup>For a more leisurely walkthrough of empiricist semantics, see Millgram, 2005, pp. 205f, 219.

<sup>3</sup>For background, see Millgram, 2019, secs. 2.4 and 3.5.

<sup>4</sup>For instance, as Kant had realized, the British empiricists could not explain thoughts having spatial or temporal contents (Longuenesse, 1998); impending circularities in the view (nicely laid out by Garrett, 1981, as a problem for Hume) required them to adopt primitives that in their more sober moods they themselves regarded as unacceptable (Mill, 1965–1991, vol. IX, pp. 193f, 207f); they had no decent (i.e., contentful) account of qualitative similarity, even though the notion did a great deal of philosophical work for them.

up front, known without looking, known apriori. The empiricists sometimes presented their semantics as an empirical psychological theory, but it could not have been anything of the sort.<sup>5</sup> The utilitarians were in no position to give an empirical argument for utility being the only thing that mattered. Moreover, it became harder and harder to claim that the sort of guidelines for choice and practice that ordinary citizens would recognize as moral were going to drop out of utility-driven reasoning; but to (most of) the utilitarian theorists, those guidelines had the status of something we all already know, i.e., they were held apriori.<sup>6</sup>

So the pragmatists' first move was to replace the empiricist theory of content with their own, initially formulated by Charles Sanders Peirce as the Pragmatist Maxim:

Consider what effects, that 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

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<sup>5</sup>And indeed, here is John Dewey, with representative complaints on this point:

A thoroughly false psychology of mental development underlay sensation-alistic empiricism. Experience is in truth a matter of *activities*. . . It would seem as if five minutes' unprejudiced observation of the way an infant gains knowledge would have sufficed to overthrow the notion that he is passively engaged in receiving impressions of isolated ready-made qualities of sound, color, hardness, etc. (1985, pp. 279f)

[Or again, this from earlier writing:]

Every important advance in scientific method means better agencies, more skilled technique for simply detaching and describing what is . . . given. To be able to find out what can safely be taken as *there*. . . is one phase of the effort of systematic scientific inquiry. . . To take what is discovered to be reliable evidence within a more complex *situation* as if it were given absolutely and in isolation. . . is the fallacy of empiricism as a logical theory.

What sense is there in directing us to compare highest results of scientific inquiry with the bare sequence of our own states of feeling. . . ? . . . This is professedly to test the validity of a system of meanings by comparison with that whose defects call forth the construction of the system of meanings. (1916, pp. 152, 166)

<sup>6</sup>On the status of the Principle of Utility, recall Mill's remark that "If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so" (1965–1991, vol. X, p. 234). The consequences of the most prevalent nineteenth-century version of the Principle of Utility, on which utility consisted in the sensations of pleasure and pain, were gradually worked out by the Decadents; see Pessoa, 2001, "Sentimental Education," at pp. 453–457, for something tantamount to a short manifesto, and Millgram, 2010, for an overview of Oscar Wilde's version of the conclusion.

the object.<sup>7</sup>

The sloganized conception of truth that we think of as the centerpiece of pragmatism—in James’s formulation, “the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief”—was an application of the Pragmatist Maxim.<sup>8</sup> And in fact the pragmatists eventually produced three distinct theories of truth that will matter for the story I am telling here. The first was arrived at by their founding figure: Peirce argued that the only effects that could properly be attributed to the truth of a belief, as opposed to your believing it, are a matter of its being borne out in the end. It followed that truth is what everyone is inevitably going to agree on, if the investigation is properly conducted, and is allowed to run its course, till the end of time.<sup>9</sup> That conclusion provided him, along with later pragmatists, a distinctive and surprising form of argument. A successful pattern of argumentation is one that brings you to true conclusions. Truth is what will be agreed on at the end of time. Thus it further follows that to show that people will agree on something at the end of time counts as a successful argument for it.

## 2

Already we can see how the pragmatist account of content, the ensuing initial theory of truth, and the unwavering commitment to extirpating the a priori jointly gave rise to a difficulty that proved to define the trajectory of classical pragmatism. The application of the Pragmatist Maxim and its later variants produced one unbelievable conclusion after another, and the pragmatists had put themselves in the position of being unable simply to dismiss them as artefacts of their method. I’ll call this the *Artefact Problem*, and I’ll survey a handful of examples from Peirce, both to provide a sense of

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<sup>7</sup>Peirce, 1982–, III:266; “conception” is a technical term for him, contrasted with “index,” so readers shouldn’t take for granted that the content of the Maxim is obvious on the face of it. You might also be wondering why the Pragmatist Maxim was not itself as apriorist as the theory of content it was meant to displace, but this is not the place to recap the attempts to show the Pragmatist Maxim to be something other than another apriori Archimedean point. Finally for now, Peirce derived a theory of meaning (his famous ‘semiotic’) from the Pragmatist Maxim, so readers should also not take it for granted that what I’ve introduced as a theory of content is his theory of meaning, no distinctions necessary.

<sup>8</sup>James, 1981, p. 37, italics deleted; I’ll cite *Pragmatism* by P and arabic page number or roman lecture number below.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Peirce, 1982–, vol. II, p. 354f; Goodman, 1983, p. 91, n. 3, is a thoughtful complaint.

how the problem arises, and by way of introducing the point of intersection between Putnam's pragmatist turn and the history of classical pragmatism. That will put us in a position to investigate how the Artefact Problem shaped the development of pragmatism.

First, we observe that, over time, scientists' observations and measurements become ever more precise. There are two candidate explanations: the first is that the values we are measuring have always been sharp, and our measurements are improving; the second is that the universe started out fuzzy and nondeterministic, and we are observing it gradually becoming sharper and more rule-governed. The content of our conceptions—in this case, of physical laws—is given by their effects, which are observations and measurements. So by the Pragmatist Maxim, the first of these hypotheses outruns the possible contents of our thoughts: because measurements always have a margin of error, which is observed to decrease over time, a physical law—what the law *says*—must be imprecise, and get more precise over time. This is Peirce's tychism, the doctrine that chanciness is real, that determinism is consequently false, but that because the universe develops habits, determinism will eventually become true.<sup>10</sup>

Peirce's tychism is an outrageous and strictly incredible view. But—leaving aside objections to the actual argument<sup>11</sup>—pragmatists are not in a position to dismiss it on those grounds. The point of pragmatism was to extirpate the residual apriori; to insist that a claim like tychism *can't* be correct is just to rely on what you already know, on what you know without looking: that is, it is to appeal to the apriori. Tychism nicely illustrates pragmatists' inability to sort deliverances of the pragmatic method into believable results, on the one hand, and mere artefacts, the theoretical equivalent of glare on the camera lens, on the other.

His tychism was not by any means the only such apparent result, and here is another. Peirce dismissed irrational numbers, on the grounds that any actual measurement can have only a fraction as its value.

What possible effect upon conduct can it have, for example, to believe that the diagonal of a square is incommensurable with the side? Name a discrepancy  $\epsilon$  no matter how small, and the

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<sup>10</sup>Peirce, 1982–, vol. VIII, chs. 23–24. Notice the anti-apriorist sensibility on display: normally philosophers assume that, as a metaphysical thesis, the truth of determinism is to be known apriori, and therefore if determinism is true, it must *always* be true. Here we have Peirce advancing a view on which it is *sometimes* true.

<sup>11</sup>For instance, Steve Capone (personal communication) has observed that tychism makes it hard to explain why scientists work so hard to improve their methods of measurement. Wouldn't the laws' ever-increasing precision do the job for them?

diagonal differs from a rational quantity by much less than that.

The proposition that the diagonal is incommensurable has stood in the textbooks from time immemorial without ever being assailed and I am sure that the most modern type of mathematician holds to it most decidedly. Yet it seems quite absurd to me to say that there is any objective practical difference between commensurable and incommensurable.<sup>12</sup>

Peirce was himself mathematically quite adept, and would have been aware of the revisions mathematics as we know it would require to be brought into line with his attempted correction. So his willingness to accept the conclusion is an indicator of how very far he was willing to follow the method of pragmatism wherever it led—and so of his being unable to disregard unreasonable outputs of the method.

Third, and quite dramatically, the core of Peirce’s “trichotomic” was the “remarkable theorem” which Peirce claimed to have proved: that for inferential purposes, you never need relations of arity greater than 3.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the conclusion, that the world, metaphysically, contains only relations of arity three or lower, is, once given the “remarkable theorem,” a straightforward consequence of the Pragmatist Maxim. It follows from the Maxim, Peirce had argued, that what’s true is what’s *fated* to be agreed upon. What can be agreed upon are assertions or sentences or beliefs, and because relations of arity  $> 3$  are reducible to relations of arity  $\leq 3$ , assertions which mention relations of arity  $\leq 3$  are nonoptional, whereas assertions whose contents are relations of arity  $> 3$  are merely optional. So the truths—again, what’s fated to be agreed upon—will exhibit relations of arity  $\leq 3$ .<sup>14</sup> This is a clear case of an artefact of the process of investigation being reified into a conclusion: investigations deploy signs, signs exhibit (what we call) logical form, the opposition between avoidable and unavoidable logic form constrains the outcome of an investigation, which in turn constitutes the finally agreed upon truth. The most striking aspect of Peirce’s lengthy

<sup>12</sup>Peirce, 1998, p. 141. Peirce may have later gotten cold feet; one of the ways out that he considered, together with the ensuing costs, comes in for consideration in Misak, 2004, e.g., at p. 28: roughly, that over and above observational consequences, a pragmatist can take into account effects on mathematical practice.

<sup>13</sup>Herzberger, 1981; the idea was that you can decompose any relation of greater arity into relations of arity equal to or smaller than 3, but that triadic relations can’t be reduced to predicates and two-place relations.

<sup>14</sup>There is, however, an exegetical puzzle, which is that Peirce in addition produced a lengthy series of very different abortive arguments for the view. Here I won’t consider how he saw them to be related to what, if I am right, was the underlying train of thought.

engagement with the idea is that, instead of dismissing it as a side effect, he took it to be revealing the deep structure of the real world.

Let's proceed to a fourth and, for our expository purposes, more important application of the Maxim, which became perhaps the most dramatic possible instance of the Artefact Problem: what we can call the *Problem of the Vanishing Past*. Truth is what's fated to be agreed upon at the end of investigation, which is, in principle, the end of time. But any particular historically located and contingent fact, event or record is liable to be lost, beyond recovery, long before the end of history; individuals vanish, because when you wait till the end of time, all the individuals are forgotten. So only patterns of events or facts that inevitably keep on repeating themselves—or which can be repeated at will—are real. There are no truths to be had about contingently existing particulars, or not enough of them to matter.<sup>15</sup>

How could Peirce's conclusion have been cotenable with the thought that we arrive at truths empirically, i.e., by observation, which is, one would think, necessarily of particulars? It took Peirce a while to work his way around to the solution, which was that observations are not after all of particulars:

it is not in an experiment, but in *experimental phenomena*, that rational meaning is said to consist. When an experimentalist speaks of a *phenomenon*, such as “Hall's phenomenon,” “Zeeman's phenomenon” and its modification, “Michelson's phenomenon,” or “the chessboard phenomenon,” he does not mean any particular event that did happen to someone in the dead past, but what *surely will* happen to everybody in the living future who shall fulfill certain conditions. (1998, p. 340)

That is, the “effects” invoked by the Pragmatist Maxim are universals—i.e., what *we* would now use the word for, as in the “Hall Effect”.

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<sup>15</sup>The alacrity with which it was taken for granted both that the past vanishes and that this is an unacceptable result seems to me a sign that the pragmatist way of thinking hadn't been extended to topics in philosophy of time. We could have second thoughts: the track record seems to be that, as time goes on, we know *more* about the past, often in ways we could not have anticipated. (We'll shortly be considering dinosaurs, so advances in paleontology can serve as an illustration.) Moreover, why is it that we regard what would be the openness of the past differently from that of the present or the future, about which we also will not know everything? (I'm grateful to Abby Pace for pressing this question.) A pragmatist owes an account of the immutability of the past which does not consist in imagining it as a sort of land of frozen fact, on which one can only report.—And here is why it matters to sort these issues out: it is built into the notion of the consequences that the Pragmatist Maxim appeals to that they *are* in the future, and not the past.

From the perspective of the end of time, once contingent particulars have receded into the past, they vanish. That seems to have the uncomfortable consequence that there are no truths about contingent particulars. On the one hand, this is obviously an unacceptable artefact of the method that Peirce is applying; as often in philosophy, where an apparent result has to be understood as an unintended side-effect of the technique one is using, rather than a feature of the subject matter on which it is being used. On the other hand, to insist that it is just an artefact is to lapse into apriorism: everyone just knows, already and up front, without looking, that there *are* truths about contingent particulars.

Here I won't trace out the various awkward moves that Peirce made to avoid or defuse the problem; because his successors were unsatisfied with them, and tried to do better, our own interest lies downstream.<sup>16</sup>

### 3

William James took over Peirce's conception of truth-at-the-limit, but introduced two important modifications to it. He had amended the Pragmatist Maxim to include among the content-determining effects not just reproducible observations, but also the emotional and personal consequences of having a view; these consequences were allowed to figure in determining the outcome of an inquiry.<sup>17</sup> And he relaxed Peirce's requirement that the results of inquiry be inevitable, meaning that truth was now path-dependent.

Then, anticipating a Rortian objection, that truth at the end of time comes too late to have consequences that could matter now, James also introduced a secondary but practically very important notion of truth, "truth insofar forth," truth in the meantime. In fact, James observes, we adopt new beliefs because they serve as bridges over apparent conflicts of belief

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<sup>16</sup>The interested reader can find some of them—interspersed with occasional attempts to improve on Peirce's responses—in Misak, 2004, pp. 137–158. You will notice that the improvements on offer were previously canvassed over the course of the history of classical pragmatism; seeing them get reinvented should reinforce one's sense of how minimal the analytic uptake of that history has been.

<sup>17</sup>James, 1956, ch. 1. Our most elaborate display of the revised method is the effort devoted to collecting and taxonomizing the emotional effects of religious belief, and their consequences for personal life. The results of James's efforts are reported in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1967), and the upshot is given by the title: there are *different varieties*. Had there been only one sort of religious experience that turned out to be the emotional consequence of, say, a belief in God, that would have put James in a position to appeal to it to argue for or against belief in God on the basis of its personal consequences. As it turned out, such a simple argument was not in the offing.



(or attitudes more generally). And we are conservative in our adjustments to our overall theoretical postures; that is, we opt for the simplest and most direct revisions, those that keep the surgery as minimal as possible. “New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions” (P 31). Consequently, the effects of truth insofar forth just *are* to remove clashes and conflicts from our system of beliefs in this way, and consequently (remember that Pragmatist Maxim!) to be true-in-the-meantime just *is* to serve as such a conservative patch: “to be true,” he says, “*means* only to perform this marriage-function” (P 33).

Notice a handful of consequences that account for the further development of the distinctively pragmatist style of argumentation. Again, to be a valid form of argument is just to be one that reliably gives rise to truths. To be true insofar forth is to be a conservative patch applied to a clash in attitudes. It follows that to show a belief to be a minimal such patch is to give an argument for it. James begins his most famous work, *Pragmatism*, by describing a clash between two “temperaments,” which he calls “tough-minded” and “tender-minded.” He then introduces pragmatism as a way of mediating the clash. His notion of truth insofar forth is also put on the table in *Pragmatism*, and his readers by and large have not picked up on James’s explanation of the large-scale argument of the book: if pragmatism proves to be the most economical way of mediating the clash of temperaments, it is *thereby* true—insofar forth, in the meantime (P I, II).

Let’s return momentarily to the question of how truth-in-the-limit could figure into actual practice. James gives us a way of arguing for it. Once a claim has been adopted as true insofar forth, it may come to clash with experience, or be seen to clash with some further belief or temperament. That clash will in turn be patched with some conservative change or addition to the overall body of belief; if the initial claim is not dislodged, the overlay will make it harder to revise. And if this process continues long enough, the initial claim will eventually become so buried beneath additional truths that—if it is not revised relatively early on—it will become effectively impossible to change: it will, we can anticipate, never be the most conservative alteration of our system of belief to surrender it. (This year’s bark, James analogized, becomes a ring in the trunk of the later years’ tree.) But if the claim is never going to be surrendered, then it will remain standing at the end of inquiry; which means that it will be true in the limit. And indeed James suggests that what we think of as our metaphysical categories—his list includes being a thing or a kind, causation, unified space and time, minds and bodies—were originally merely such conservative adjustments by our ancient ancestors. These adjustments could perhaps have been made

differently at the time, but so much has been built on them that it is now simply too late to give up, say, the notion that everything has a cause. A valid mode of argument is one that reliably gives rise to truths; now we can see that to show that it is too late to give up a deeply entrenched view is to show that it is true-in-the-limit; consequently, showing that a view is *that* deeply entrenched counts as an *argument* for it.<sup>18</sup>

Different philosophical traditions are normally characterized by distinctive modes of argument. That is as true of classical pragmatism as it is of analytic philosophy, and is perhaps a principled reason why analytic philosophers know so little about pragmatism. Because philosophers generally recognize only argumentation of the sorts they encountered during their own education, when we do read the pragmatists, we mostly fail to recognize their arguments for what they are. And of course if you do not identify a philosopher's arguments, you are unlikely to be able to follow his train of thought. Our adeptness at our own forms of argument gets in the way of reassimilating our discarded pragmatist heritage.<sup>19</sup>

## 4

In Peirce, we saw that individuals vanish, because when you wait till the end of time, all the individuals are forgotten. Jamesian truth-insofar-forth is truth in the meantime; you don't have to wait until the end of time for a truth to solidify, and so there are a great many contingent individuals you can believe in, anyway for now. But the problem has only changed its shape: the deep past, containing all those individuals that are *already* forgotten (say, almost all of the dinosaurs), vanishes.

Already we can anticipate what the accretions of conservative adjustments to our system of belief are meant to do for James. He summarizes an objection he fielded in what has come down to us as the *Journal of Philosophy* as follows:

antediluvian planetary history. . . we assume. . . is never to be known.  
 . . . your whole pragmatist theory. . . requires ideas and workings

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<sup>18</sup>P V, and James, 1911, p. 62; to be sure, at about the very time that James composed *Pragmatism*, Einstein was showing that it paid to do just the thing that James thought it would never pay to do. . . but for making sense of James's view, that is neither here nor there.

<sup>19</sup>And *why* do we find these different modes of argument? A Jamesian, Madeleine Parkinson has suggested to me, can account for the variety in terms of independent, differently-made choices—subsequently entrenched in the manner we've been describing—as to how to smooth over one conflict or another.

to constitute [truth]; but in the present instance...neither ideas nor workings can exist...[But] if you elect to say that there is *no* truth [about antediluvian history]...then you fly in the face of common sense (1911, pp. 287f).

And here he is unsheathing his countermove:

The overwhelming majority of our true ideas admit of no direct or face-to-face verification—those of past history for example, as of Cain and Abel. The stream of time can be remounted only verbally, or verified indirectly by the present prolongations or effects of what the past harbored. Yet if they agree with these verbalities and effects, we can know that our ideas of the past are true. *As true as past time itself was*, so true was Julius Ceasar, so true were antediluvian monsters, all in their proper dates and settings. That past time itself was, is guaranteed by its coherence with everything that's present (P 97).

The deep past is another layer of bark on the tree of truth turning into trunk. Suppose, just for instance, you've accepted a principle such as: Everything has a prior cause. Then consider regresses of causes; if there was no deep past for them to have taken place in, isn't your principle violated? It would have been a conservative patch repairing such emerging tensions to adopt the view that the world is much older than anyone remembers; it became *true*, true insofar forth, that there had been a long history, which on the basis of historical records and archaeological evidence became populated by humans and dinosaurs (in James's quaintly archaic turn of phrase, antediluvian monsters). And the existence of the deep past has itself had so many further truths accreted onto it that we can now be pretty sure it's not going to get extirpated: we can be for all practical purposes sure that, at the end of inquiry, everyone will agree there was a deep past. So, because it would be too disruptive to stop believing it, it's true, not only insofar forth, but at the limit.

In a moment, I'll register second thoughts about how effective a repair job that was. But now let me introduce a noteworthy recapitulation of the turning point we have just noticed.

## 5

In the early 1980s, Hilary Putnam proposed what he later came to think of as a pragmatist conception of truth. Rejecting his own previous position

(which he came to describe, dismissively, as “metaphysical realism”), he announced that truth was idealized rational acceptability.<sup>20</sup> Hartry Field quickly objected to Putnam, in the *Journal of Philosophy*, that there have certainly been fewer than  $10^{10}$  dinosaurs, and so exactly one statement of the following form is true: “There have been exactly  $n$  dinosaurs,” where  $0 < n < 10^{10}$ . Since rational acceptability, when it comes to questions like this, is a matter of evidence, and since, at this point in history, almost all the evidence about what took place during the age of the dinosaurs is gone, no statement of the form “There have been exactly  $n$  dinosaurs” will henceforth be rationally acceptable. Field concluded that truth can’t be idealized rational acceptability.<sup>21</sup>

I described the recapitulation as noteworthy, because Putnam evidently had no idea that he was reinventing a view held by Peirce and James; only later did he come to identify himself as a torchbearer of pragmatism. And it’s clear that neither he nor Field had any idea that an almost identical argument had, as we’ve seen, been leveled against James. That back and forth between James and his opponents had been conducted in the very journal—one of the flagship journals of analytic philosophy—where Field published his objection to Putnam. That two prominent philosophers could, between them, reinvent the pragmatist theory of truth and a standard reply to it, do part of the back and forth in the *Journal of Philosophy*, and not know that they were retreading ground covered by equally prominent philosophers in

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<sup>20</sup>Putnam, 1981, pp. 55f; Putnam left it open what the idealization should consist in. The reason was this. Suppose you think that we don’t *already*—a priori, without looking—know what rationality consists in. Over the course of history, we’ve evidently learnt more about it: we now have probability theory; we’ve learned to discount certain kinds of anecdote, and insist on controlled experiments, double blind and counterbalanced for order. . . So we can’t just give a list of things to idealize.

We also don’t want simply to appeal to the end of time: sometimes truth is straightforward, and it takes a very short time to find it. Moreover, in the sort of academic business where the need to publish never abates, less-than-incorruptible inquirers keep going past the finish line, and discard the straightforward for the perverse—as in many familiar readings of philosophical and literary texts. Thus often you do better by going with results arrived at before those incentives take over. So Putnam gestured at the *right* idealization of rationality, whatever that is, opening up room to argue about it.

<sup>21</sup>Field, 1982, p. 556; however, Aubrey Spivey has pointed out to me that, in arguing over the apparent counterexample, both Putnam and Field failed to notice where—on plausible assumptions about bounded rationality and the importance of the usability of a theory—it leaves us. Picking up on the point of the previous note, a Putnamian pragmatist can allow a theory (in the case at hand, that truth is idealized rational acceptability) to be true *and* to have counterexamples, because accepting it might be the right move for a boundedly rational agent: a startling observation! Thus Field’s argument-by-counterexample was insufficiently sensitive to the spirit of the pragmatist program.

that journal, pleads for an explanation, and I will digress to suggest one.

Among Peirce's and James's contemporaries were the founding figures of analytic philosophy. Generally, in the very early stages of a new methodological approach, its repertoire is thin: it has for the most part programmatic announcements, but not much to show for them; it does not have answers to the many objections that are bound to be marshalled by defenders of more mature and more sophisticated philosophical traditions. That is why it was very important, if the fledgling analytic tradition was not going to be aborted by the much more established competition, for it to be pointedly ignorant of what the competitors had to say. And so Bertrand Russell wrote a dismissive essay which became one of the few discussions of a pragmatist position that many analytic philosophers have actually read—despite James, who was its target, having in very short order pointed out that it was a systematic and egregious misrepresentation of the pragmatist view.<sup>22</sup> Our suppression of our past has been quite determined, and so almost all we have left of pragmatism is the sound of the word, and the slogan (to reiterate, rejected as a misrepresentation) that it's true if it works. Since then, analytic philosophers have tended to think that pragmatism has to do with being practical, with what works, and with being (as ordinary folks say) 'pragmatic,' even though all of that has little or nothing to do with the subtle and extremely inventive body of philosophy that the pragmatists produced.

We—I mean, we analytic philosophers—did what we needed to do to survive, and here we are, a mature and thriving philosophical tradition ourselves. One of the consequences of having arrived at where we are is that we know scarcely anything about the philosophical history we were once so set on forgetting. We are now secure enough (or anyway, those members of the tribe who live in Pittsburgh and Leipzig are) to finally start rediscovering Hegel and Fichte. But while we have gotten around to reclaiming some of the post-Kantian philosophers, we have not yet gotten around to pragmatism.

Turning back to James's fix for the Problem of the Vanishing Past, he had assured the existence of the deep past, of dinosaurs, and even of an individual, Julius Caesar, whom it is no longer possible to meet in person. But the fix evidently does not go deep enough, most obviously because one or another very basic logical tie will need to be broken. James dithered over which one it would have to be. You could agree that there *were* di-

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<sup>22</sup>Russell, 1999; James, 1911, ch. 14. In addition, Russell's objections begged the question against James; see Millgram, 2015, p. 139, n. 28.

nosaurus...but no particular number of them, and over and above most of the individual dinosaurs themselves, most of the facts about them have disappeared. You could allow truths and facts to come apart, an option James confusedly explores in an essay on “The Existence of Julius Caesar”.<sup>23</sup> But whatever logical choice gets made, the problem has not gone away, and we can make it vivid by reminding ourselves of a very awkward juxtaposition.

Recall that our truths have been accreted step by step, over all of human history, as people have resolved clashes between beliefs and their experiences. But now, if a truth was added to resolve a clash, *somebody* must have done the adding. And much of human history, especially the early parts, has just been lost, among them, the particular people. Now there are two ways for a claim to be true: it can be in circulation, as James says it, or it can be verifiable.<sup>24</sup> When a part of history has been lost, we don’t have claims in circulation about the people we’ve forgotten. So we don’t have claims in circulation about the particular people who added those early truths; in fact, within the stretches of history that have been lost, we’ll never be able to so much as verify that any particular person existed. Either way, it’s clear that claims—anyway, nontrivial claims—about the particular people who added those early truths couldn’t be true. Suppose you allow that if it’s not *true* that someone existed, then he didn’t exist; this is just an application of the disquotation principle, that “‘*p*’ is true iff *p*”. Then our truths have been accreted, step by step, over all of human history, by people who didn’t even exist!

On the one hand, James’s account has it that our metaphysics of objects, space, time, causation and all the rest of it was the invention of cavemen that became so deeply embedded in our ways of thinking as to be impossible to surrender, and so, true. On the other hand, inventors are particular people, and it is far too late for there to be truths about those particular cavemen, now lost in the mists of time. How could we be living off inventions, which were invented by nobody?

Less obviously, recall that the form taken by the Artefact Problem, in Peirce, was that he could not dismiss one or another outrageous result as

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<sup>23</sup>Confusedly: see esp. James, 1911, pp. 223f.

<sup>24</sup>That is, sometimes James suggests that the function of present ascriptions of truth-in-the-limit is roughly analogous to making a currency legal tender: “Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass’, so long as nothing challenges them, just as banknotes pass as long as nobody refuses them” (P 95) and just as we are confident that others will accept our money, because they in turn expect further trading partners to accept it, so we mark our expectation that one claim or another will stay in play, as far as we can see, indefinitely, by saying that it’s true.

an artefact of his method. James worked very hard to avoid the outrageous results. But whether or not he succeeded (and we've just had second thoughts), the upshot of his efforts was to see the difficulty reappear in a subtler and more disturbing form. In James, the Artefact Problem is that one or another feature of the real world as we understand it—in this case, the deep past—is only an artefact of the pragmatic method. We have a past after all, one that goes back far enough to include the dinosaurs, the cavemen who invented our metaphysical categories, Julius Caesar and so on, but it is a past-by-convenience. Unlike the current-day events that we experience, it has a different (and, we pretheoretically think, the *wrong kind of*) status. But as before, a pragmatist is in no position to insist that the status of the deep past *is* of the wrong kind; that would just be apriorism about a realist metaphysics of the past.

## 6

Putnam once remarked, of the body of writing that Peirce left us, that it was a continent.<sup>25</sup> Much the same could be said of John Dewey, and here I will mark only a few of the working parts of his quite elaborate mature theoretical position. What we are after is his uptake of the Artefact Problem, as it was handed off to him by James.

Dewey had an historical diagnosis for our philosophical situation. Ancient Greek society had been divided into the leisured classes, on the one hand, and those who did the work, on the other, with the former looking down on the latter. That social structure bequeathed us a clash between two temperaments, the aristocratic, and that of the working classes and artisans. Thus when the class with time on its hands for such pursuits got around to philosophizing, the aristocrats wrote their class prejudices into their metaphysics, ethics, and everything else: to sit around contemplating was good, actually doing something with your hands was bad, and naturally their theorizing was done in stubborn ignorance of anything hands-on. Pragmatism is what you get when you finally undo the damage: it's to think about the subject matter of philosophy in a way that's informed by the intellectual habits of craftsmen and laborers, who pay attention to effects and consequences.

By way of a representative illustration, here is Dewey putting his framing to work in a criticism of his contemporary, Bertrand Russell. Like other early analytic philosophers, Russell had held that we were directly

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<sup>25</sup>Personal communication.

acquainted with sense data, which are theory-free experiences: experiences you *just have*, all on their own. Dewey responded that sense data are allegedly items of which you're aware, but you're only aware of things if they belong in a series of thoughts you're tracking: if they're the consequence of something you're concerned about, or if they have consequences you're concerned about. (Otherwise, you simply won't pay attention.) Consequences, when routinized, are meanings, this being Dewey's later adjustment to earlier pragmatists' theories of content. So you're only aware of sense data when they're overlaid by meanings; but when a sense datum is overlaid by a meaning, it's "suffused" by that meaning. Thus you're never acquainted with Russell's purified—theory- and practice-free—sensory epistemic starting points.<sup>26</sup>

This was Dewey addressing himself to one aspect of the Artefact Problem, as it had been reconfigured in James. We have naively been couching the Problem in language that a principled pragmatist of course cannot allow: in this case, that the deep past has the status of an artefact of the method, rather than being the real article. But how can this contrast be characterized in a way that doesn't beg the question against the pragmatist's anti-apriorist stance? In James's way of thinking, we live in a world of experience: my experience includes the mountain that I can see out the window, as well as the hike up the mountain that I never took, but hope to take—as we would put it, the intentional object of my hopeful attitude—along with relations, such as that between my memory of the mountain yesterday, and my experience of the mountain today.<sup>27</sup> The contrast between such experi-

<sup>26</sup>Again, Dewey argued that 'psychophysical events' (this was Dewey's dismissive way of talking about raw inner goings on) don't distinguish *themselves* into different types of cognition. A mental picture might be a sensation; but it might also be a daydream, or a desire, or a hallucination, or a craving, and he remarked that "awarenesses do not come to us labeled 'I am caused by an event initiated on the surface of the body by other bodies.'" So sense data can only be picked out with the help of additional theory. Now, a daydream doesn't purport to be true, and neither does a craving; before you know whether it's a sense datum, you don't know if it purports to so much as be true. Thus, the sense datum theorist's epistemic starting points have to be picked out with the help of an additional theory, and it's a causal theory: one which accounts for the cognition as the effect of, roughly, a stimulus impinging on your outer envelope. "Sensations are... a class of meanings which embody the mature results of elaborate experimental inquiry in tracing out causal dependencies and relationships. This inquiry depends upon prior possession of a system of meanings, physical theories of light, sounds, etc., and of knowledge of nervous structures and functions." But now, if you need to have a causal, empirical theory (of the nervous system, and who knows what-all else) *before* you can pick out the sense data, sense data can't be your epistemic starting point (Dewey, 1958, pp. 310, 333, 326; cf. 333f).

<sup>27</sup>For the way in which we experience current events, see James, 1976, Essays 1–4.



ences and the deep past is that, obviously, no one alive has experienced it, or is going to; even if we allow that I experience the past, by remembering what I did yesterday, or by having been there, nobody has experienced the dinosaurs. So, Dewey concluded, the real problem—all there could actually be to the Artefact Problem—was the *contrast*, between what is experienced and the intellectual conveniences.

The facts of present and available experience and the facts about the deep past seem awkwardly different from each other: one is theory-free and right there in front of you, whereas the other is merely a theoretical construct, onboarded to keep your intellectual world in order. So Dewey set about removing the difference, by reconstruing immediate experience, in the form that his own contemporaries described it, as *also* a theoretical construct; we've just reviewed one leg of that particular marathon.

Suffice it that Dewey's strategy was almost uniformly to efface the contrast between the real thing right here and a methodological artefact, by providing a reconstruction that made the putatively real thing out to have been also an artefact. On the face of it, and to an outsider, this approach to the Artefact Problem only makes it worse: as in James's response to Peirce, it has been pushed into a subtler, deeper, more peculiar form. Instead of not being able to distinguish between what you really encounter and methodological side effects, *everything* has become (but of course, put this way, it's a question-begging complaint) a methodological side-effect: the observations, and so the consequences that are the bottom line for what things mean, are side-effects—and even *you yourself* are a methodological side-effect.<sup>28</sup>

## 7

We can see Dewey's strategy shaping what proved to be the last major turning point in the history of classical pragmatism. To explain it, I need to take a few moments to lay out what he took to be the problem he was facing, and in addition to introduce Dewey's reappropriation and deepening of Jamesian truth insofar forth.

Theoretical reasoning is figuring out how the facts stand; practical reasoning is reasoning about what to do. Dewey found himself considering the common sense of his day (and still the common sense of ours!), which distinguished and indeed separated these two aspects of thinking in a way he found unsupportable. Moreover, the shared understanding of practical

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<sup>28</sup>See, e.g., Dewey, 1984, pp. 91, 138, 150, 179.

reasoning was centered around a particular construction put on the relation between means and ends, one that Dewey took to be inherited from those ancient Greek class divisions: the ends, which are set antecedently and independently of the means, justify the means. (That, he thought, was just writing into theory the practice in which a master decides what is to be done, and then the slave or metic sets about doing it.) Dewey addressed these concerns head on in a piece, “Theory of Valuation,” that was originally a short book contributed to the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Sciences*. You may appreciate the irony of this being the positivist series that, with a similar lack of defensiveness, was later to be the imprint housing Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>29</sup>

At this point in the development of pragmatism, you will not be surprised to see the argument in such an essay start out by identifying a “bifurcation, amounting a radical split,” that is going to be resolved by a James-style patch: in this case, between the hard, purely descriptive sciences, and “human conduct” (TV 192). A secondary bifurcation, which is embedded in that primary split, was between “value” taken “as a verb and a noun” (TV 194). Since all the facts, and all the thinking about them, are on the side of hard science (the high-prestige locus of theoretical reasoning), all that is left to set the ends and values that determine choices and decisions are either desires, mere emotional responses, or the blind insistence that one just *knows* what is valuable. Pursuing one of these branches, Dewey took up A. J. Ayer’s exposition of emotivism, in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, as his foil, and provided local arguments for taking the bifurcations to be unsustainable.<sup>30</sup> For instance, and now Dewey was hoisting Ayer by his own petard, given Ayer’s own views about what it took to be meaningful, the emotivist’s ascriptions of mere emotions were meaningless. Or again, the desire-first model of practical reasoning will trap agents into unreasonable and self-destructive courses of action: you will end up burning down your house to roast the pig inside.<sup>31</sup> But the underlying reasons for bridging that split were of a piece with the pressures we have seen playing out in the present rehearsal of the history of pragmatism until this point.

Come Dewey, we find pragmatism settled on a fairly clear picture of the important core of theoretical reasoning, and it’s now oddly familiar:

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<sup>29</sup>Dewey, 1981, citations by TV and page; Kuhn, 1970.

<sup>30</sup>TV 196ff; Ayer, 1952, esp. ch. 6.

<sup>31</sup>Dewey went so far as to characterize—writing in 1939!—the gap “between ideas that have *scientific* warrant and uncontrolled emotions that dominate practice” (TV 249) as so “unendurable,” that it explained (at least in part) the dictatorships of the early and mid-twentieth century.

more or less Willard Quine’s notion, that you eliminate conflicts in the ‘web of belief’ by making minimal adjustments to it, adjustments that are, in that metaphor, as far out toward periphery of the web as possible.<sup>32</sup> The familiarity is not a coincidence; Quine had adopted the pragmatists’ procedure, while discarding the arguments for it that were no longer intelligible to analytic philosophers. To remind ourselves, this made the products of theoretical reasoning look—to investigators with a naive interest in what the facts are, already and by themselves—like methodological artefacts across the board.

But stepping back to a broader point of view, in which practical reasoning and the evaluations that figure in it sit alongside theoretical reasoning, the pragmatist version of theoretical rationality appears comparatively disadvantaged. As we mentioned, the uncontroversial centerpiece of practical rationality was the means-end relation, being treated as the one thing you could be confident of: even in a philosophical culture that had lost its confidence in evaluations, the ends justified the means.<sup>33</sup>

By the turn of the millenium, metaethicists would have “moral realism” to serve as their label for the way that sole remaining evaluation or assessment went entirely unquestioned. That stance regarding instrumental rationality could not but make those results of cumulative adjustments to the web of belief seem second-rate—as we’ve been putting it, artefactual. And we already know how Dewey handled this sort of problem: the awkward contrast would be removed by reconstruing practical reasoning as of a piece with those Jamesian patches, and by following in the footsteps of the many post-Kantians who had cast a dubious eye on that contrast between theoretical and practical reason.

Accordingly, Dewey’s first of two new truths insofar forth was that, rather than the end justifying the means, henceforth we would understand the means to justify the adoption of ends. Practical reasoning is triggered, Dewey observed, when formerly habitual modes of activity clash and become mutually frustrating; it consists in the first place in selecting a new end that coordinates the available means and activities into a newly unified form of activity that can once again subside into habit.<sup>34</sup> Practical rational-

<sup>32</sup>Quine, 1963, pp. 42ff; the phrase is the title of Quine and Ullian, 1978.

<sup>33</sup>Quick documentation of that confidence in means-end justification: witness the way instrumental reasoning is used as a kind of Archimedean point when someone wants to argue for more ambitious claims about practical rationality or morality. Those arguments have more or less the shape: Instrumental rationality is at any rate real; if it is, some other form of moral thinking has to be also; therefore. . . (e.g., Korsgaard, 1986, Hampton, 1998, and even some of my own earlier work: Millgram, 1997).

<sup>34</sup>TV 220–22, but don’t mishear “habit” as mere mechanical reflex: “Where there is a

ity would no longer consist in treating ends as simply given by the whim of a decisionmaker. (Even when the decisionmaker is yourself, Dewey thought, that precedence was *still* a relic of class distinction in the ancient world.) Rather, and as in the pragmatist take on theoretical rationality, when adjustments are adopted to remove incoherences, nothing in the mix would be treated as privileged and incorrigible.

That move also bridged the division between theoretical and practical reasoning; both of them turned out to be forms of activity in which conflicts and clashes that disrupt and stall the activity are removed by adjustments that permit it to resume. “The *practical* problem... is [for] emotions and ideas, desires and appraisals, [to be] integrated” (TV 249). Perhaps not surprisingly at this stage, the resolution of that initial tension, between the hard sciences and the guidance we provide for human conduct, is to “outline a program” (TV 239), namely, the resolution we’ve just now sketched. That is, the resolution was to demarcate a new course of now-reintegrated activity, i.e., it was, per the pattern that resolution had introduced, adopting a new end.

But of course, to a naive outsider, the Artefact Problem has only been made worse. Before, your reasoning about what to do had been meant to take care of what *really* mattered, or at any rate what really mattered to *you*. Now your ‘valuings,’ your desires, and your ends are themselves just more compromises, the ones that allow you to pick yourself up after a stumble, and resume doing—not quite what you had been doing before, but something close enough. Parity has been managed by making the drivers of practical reasoning just as artefactual as the results of theoretical investigation.

## 8

It was inevitable that the improved and deepened methodology be applied to the theoretical activity of philosophy itself. Classical pragmatism, in its mature, Deweyan form, tells us to readjust and rework clashing streams of activity, so as to merge them into a unified stream of activity going forward. If I am seeing it rightly, the Artefact Problem accounts for a great deal of the trajectory of classical pragmatism, from its beginnings in Peirce to its death knell in Morton White.

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habit, there is acquaintance with the materials and equipment to which action is applied. There is a definite way of understanding the situations in which the habit operates. . . there are habits of judging and reasoning as truly as of handling a tool, painting a picture, or conducting an experiment” (Dewey, 1985, p. 53).

By the 1950s, there were three prominent ways of doing philosophy in English-speaking philosophy departments: logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, and the Deweyan tail end of pragmatism. These ways of philosophizing were inconsistent modes of proceeding philosophically, and so pragmatism itself required addressing the clash by proposing a new end-in-view: here, a new mode of philosophizing that would synthesize the competing streams.<sup>35</sup> Morton White's book attempted to do just that—it was appropriately called *Towards Reunion in Philosophy* (1963)—and as his son, Nicholas White, once put it to me, they gave a reunion, and nobody came.

Perhaps the right explanation for the failure is merely sociological, but I suspect otherwise. What good could have come of attempting to merge argument by appeal to consequences with argument by appeal to English usage with argument in the frankly apriorist mode of Russell-Moore conceptual analysis? As we see in, just for instance, the inept uptake of ordinary-language philosophy by analytic philosophers, if you are deploying one of these modes of argument as your lens when you examine another, defaultly, what you are looking at simply will not make sense to you. And so, if I am right, classical pragmatism died for a principled reason: in coping with the Artefact Problem, it had worked itself into a theoretical stance where it was committed to proceeding by merging itself with early analytic philosophy and with ordinary language philosophy. But that merger was not a viable project.

In *Time in the Ditch*, John McCumber observes that we need to account for the overwhelming dominance of analytic philosophy in the United States. Somewhat earlier in the twentieth century, American philosophy was split fairly evenly between ancestors of what we now call Continental philosophy, pragmatism, and our own predecessors. You would have expected each of these traditions to sustain itself and recruit new adherents, but come the postwar period, we find analytic philosophers suddenly running just about the whole show. However did that happen?<sup>36</sup>

McCumber's explanation is that, during the McCarthy period, doing

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<sup>35</sup>But surely pragmatists cannot be committed to integrating worthless courses of activity—think fortune-telling and similar superstitious practices—with worthwhile ones. Why couldn't pragmatists have proceeded by casually discarding the philosophical competition?

Presumably that was not an option because it was hard to see the live traditions as *simply* worthless. Whatever one thinks of analytic or ordinary-language methodology, say, there seem to be insights and treatments you can't just shrug off; Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment (1975) or Austin's discussion of the word "real" (Austin, 1962, pp. 70f), might be suitable illustrations.

<sup>36</sup>McCumber, 2001.

philosophy that pretended to be mathematics was a way of seeming apolitical and innocuous. However, there seems to have been no dearth of midcentury analytic philosophers publicly adopting the politics of the radical left, and that proposal is implausible. Rather, we have on hand a different, albeit partial, explanation: the abrupt death of pragmatism was produced by the internal dynamics of that tradition.

At this point in our discussion, we have a sense of how very much in the way of method and doctrine had been accreted by the pragmatist tradition before it exited the stage—and also of how strikingly alien it is to an analytic philosopher’s manner of thinking. So I am not myself a pragmatist.<sup>37</sup> But I do find Putnam’s attempt to appropriate and reconstitute both the philosophical frame of mind and the movement’s philosophical resources to be a baton that I hope other philosophers will take up. If they do, they will need to reckon with the forces that pressed classical pragmatism on to its demise. To reiterate, I am not suggesting that they cannot be resisted, rechanneled, or tamped down; but I expect the challenge will be better managed with the historical awareness I have tried to elicit here.

That historical treatment may strike you as overly analytic in style, but it is meant to invoke the Pragmatist Maxim. The title of one of Rorty’s books, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), hits the nail on the head: delineating our conception of pragmatism itself ought to be a matter of tracing out its consequences. But what *are* pragmatism’s consequences? If our discussion to this point is on track, pragmatism *is*, though only in part, its apparently inevitable attempts to work through the Artefact Problem.

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<sup>37</sup>Although since writing *Hard Truths* (2009), I have been repeatedly asked whether I am one, presumably both because of the main thesis of that book, and of the way I argued for it. The former: that we have to reason using steps that we understand to be not fully true, but partially true: kind of true, sort of true, true in a way or to one or another extent, but not flat out true. And the latter: the argument turned on the practical necessity of doing our thinking that way—roughly, I claimed that if you don’t, you won’t manage to arrive at nearly enough in the way of conclusions you need. With the etiolated understanding of pragmatism we’ve been left with—remember that misleading slogan, that it’s true if it works—the misunderstanding should be unsurprising. But as we can now see, it takes much more to stand within the pragmatist tradition than that.

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