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Introduction to the Symposium

Pietro Gori and Rachel Cristy

Pragmatism was born and has grown up in the shadow of the extraordinary success of modern science, and has had an ambivalent relationship with it since its origin. Each of the major founding pragmatists (Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey) was at some time during their career directly engaged with experimental science. All three wrote about the nature of scientific inquiry and the status of scientific theories, and reflected on the ways in which the methods of science differ from or are continuous with other methods of fixing belief. Pragmatist attitudes can be encountered in major thinkers in the history and the philosophy of science who have engaged critically with questions about the nature and value of scientific knowledge, whether or not they counted themselves as pragmatists – from Ernst Mach and Henri Poincaré (whom James named among his allies in the pragmatist trend of thought) to W.V.O. Quine and Thomas Kuhn, to Hilary Putnam, Larry Laudan, Ian Hacking, and Philip Kitcher. Finally, pragmatism walks hand in hand with naturalism, given the interest of classic pragmatists such as Peirce, James, and Chauncey Wright in demanding natural, as opposed to supernatural, answers to our philosophical questions, and their tendency to recast and recontextualize traditional philosophical issues in frameworks provided by empirical science. This tendency includes James’s application of the psychophysiological concept of the “reflex arc” to understand the process and role of cognition, and Dewey’s re-conception of epistemology and even logic in the terms of evolutionary biology, as encapsulations of the procedures of inquiry that have enabled human organisms to successfully adapt to their environment.

Despite – or parallel to – this general interest in the scientific theoretical framework, pragmatist thinkers almost always rejected scientism, understood as an attitude of science-worship involving an uncritical faith in the methods of the modern sciences, an uncritical acceptance of their assumptions and conclusions, and a quasi-religious faith in the overriding value of the scientific enterprise. In light of the impressive achievements of modern science – which had transformed the world materially with technological advancements in production, transportation, and communication, and transformed conceptions of the world with theories like thermodynamics and evolution by natural selection – scientism was prevalent among public intellectuals like
Herbert Spencer and T.H. Huxley who shaped the opinions of the educated classes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when pragmatism was emerging as a distinct philosophical movement.

Contrary to the claims of scientism, pragmatists such as James and Dewey argued that science can neither tell us what we should value, nor fully account for the value we in fact find in certain objects, activities, and experiences. As James says in “The Will to Believe,” “[s]cience can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart” (WWJ 6:27 [1896]). “A Beethoven string-quartet is truly, as someone has said, a scraping of horses’ tails on cats’ bowels, and may be exhaustively described in such terms,” James wrote in “The Sentiment of Rationality”; “but the application of this description in no way precludes the simultaneous applicability of an entirely different description” (WWJ 6:66 [1880]), which our experience of the music as beautiful seems to demand. And, crucially, the pragmatists maintained that science cannot tell us whether or why its own goal of attaining truth is valuable. The passage from “The Will to Believe” continues:

Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man’s heart in turn declares. (WWJ 6:27)

Broadly speaking, it is possible to say that pragmatism challenges scientism, protecting the original nature of lived experience from rationalism and scientific materialism; taking ideas, including scientific ones, as essentially connected with human needs and voluntary action; and regarding faith as necessary for any practical achievement of truth, in science as in any other area of life and inquiry.

The aim of this special issue is to explore the relationship of pragmatist philosophy with both science and scientism throughout the history of the tradition, from Peirce’s analysis of the representation and implementation of scientific concepts to Brandom’s contemporary pragmatic reappropriation of Hegelian epistemology for the understanding of scientific theories. A paper by Nicolas Silva and Roger T. Ames showing the opposition between pragmatist and scientistic philosophical methodology provides a programmatic opening for the issue. Silva and Ames characterize the pragmatist way of doing philosophy with reference first to the writings of three philosophers central to the American Pragmatist tradition (James, Dewey, and Rorty), but also to the Confucian tradition, to show that the pragmatist spirit and methodology are not a local peculiarity, but a general, potentially universal approach to philosophy. They encapsulate the pragmatist approach in terms of (1) a methodological commitment to the primacy of experience (broadly construed to include cultural life and practice as well as subjective phenomenology) as the starting point and constant point of reference for philosophizing, and (2) fundamental aims that are oriented toward addressing real-life practical concerns that affect ordinary people as well as professional philosophers. By contrast, they survey two strands of practice prevalent in Anglo-American “analytic” academic philosophy – “bald naturalism,” characterized by deference to current scientific theories, and “T-philosophy” (a label introduced by Paul Horwich, evoking both “traditional” and “theoretical” philosophy), which regards philosophy as a kind of a priori science, concerning a special domain of objects and conducted by specialized practitioners – and distill their common features into a more
general characterization of a “scientistic” mode of doing philosophy. The hallmarks of scientistic philosophy, in regard to both methodology and goals, turn out to be in direct opposition to those of pragmatist philosophy: (1) scientistic philosophy consistently posits a gap between ordinary experience and a purportedly truer way of understanding the world (through the natural sciences or the a priori principles of technical philosophical theorizing); and (2) its fundamental aims are exclusively theoretical, understood in terms of producing an account of what there is in the world that is indifferent to human concerns and the social contexts within which inquiry happens. Thus, Silva and Ames argue that a pragmatist approach is incompatible with scientism in philosophy, though they acknowledge that some philosophers who are considered part of the historical tradition of American Pragmatism – notably, C.S. Peirce and W.V.O. Quine – are guilty of falling into the scientistic mode of thinking when they depart from the fundamental aims and methods of pragmatist philosophy.

The following paper by Bradley Dart focuses on the engagement of classic pragmatists with scientific knowledge. More specifically, Dart outlines a pragmatist approach to the issue of axioms, definitions, and the a priori in mathematics aimed at avoiding the pitfalls of both classical essentialism and nominalism while maintaining a robust relationship with the history and practice of (mathematical) inquiry. Dart focuses on Peirce’s and Dewey’s reflections on the foundations of mathematics and explores the view that axioms or postulates of any geometrical (mathematical) system are hypothetical, operational, tentative, and judged based on their consequences in long-run inquiry. In fact, for Dart, the pragmatists Peirce and Dewey are not committed to the rationalistic or axiomatic a priori via intuition but have reconceived the a priori in terms of postulation – to be cashed out in terms of the operations and rules of action that they engender. Furthermore, Dart argues that the pragmatist viewpoint allows us to appreciate the continuity between the rationalist and the empiricist approaches; accordingly, the pragmatic a priori outlined by Peirce and Dewey (and C.I. Lewis, whose view is also considered along the paper) represents an improvement over the traditional rationalist account, insofar as it leaves room for neither absolutist nor relativist foundations of mathematics.

Also focused on Charles Peirce is the article written by Carmen Sánchez-Ovcharov and Mauricio Suárez. Their paper explores Peirce’s pragmatic approach to scientific diagrams as a viable position that successfully avoids dogmatic scientism and nihilistic skepticism alike. Sánchez-Ovcharov and Suárez bring together Peirce’s conception of pragmat(ic)ism, semiotics, and representational scientific practices, and argue that those three strands of Peirce’s thought can be applied to a relevant case study from the history of science, namely the development of Feynman Diagrams (FDs) as part of the increasing spread of Quantum Electrodynamics (QED) in the 1940s and 1950s. According to them, the representational and signifying function of an FD can be specified in light of Peirce’s philosophy of representation, understood as the science of the general laws of signs, given that the central Peircian insights regarding semiotics (which involves the concepts of signs, symbols, indexes, and icons) are applicable to scientific representational devices, and in particular to diagrams. As shown by Sánchez-Ovcharov and Suárez, a diagram is both an icon for the abstract nature or structure of a given type of scattering process and simultaneously a powerful symbolic representation of the most relevant predictive quantities for that scattering process, namely their transition probability amplitudes. Hence, the Peircean framework may provide the template for a comprehensive interpretation of the representational and signifying
functions of scientific diagrams, allowing Sánchez-Ovcharov and Suárez to defend the claim that the diagrammatic representations postulated by science may be trusted as apt inferential tools in the course of a particular scientific inquiry. Such trust cannot be infinite, indeterminate, or unconditional, however, but only extends to the conceivable practical consequences and effects of those signs. And these consequences and effects must be judged in relation to the goals prescribed by the particular inquiry that such representations are tools for. If we extend those considerations to FDs, it is possible to see that FDs are signs that stand in place of something else, different from themselves, which they represent or signify in some respect. When their “entire intellectual purport” as symbols is considered (as Peirce would have put it), FDs, besides representing probability calculations, also represent and signify structures and elements of the physical phenomena corresponding to the calculations that the diagrams enable. In other words, when drawing the diagram, we also depict the skeletal or abstract framework of scattering physical phenomena. As argued in the paper, this view may shed light on FD as depictions with complex representational capacities, on the one hand, and on the other hand it provides us with a good example of how Peirce’s pragmatism combines the ambition to puncture any grand and metaphysical vision of science as a dogmatically God-given perfect mirror of nature together with a robust commitment to science’s ability to furnish us with genuine knowledge of an independently standing reality.

With Berker Basmaci’s contribution to this special issue we put the classic pragmatist tradition aside to deal with Robert Brandom’s interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his *Spirit of Trust*. In his paper, Basmaci stresses that Brandom highlights and redeems Hegel’s criticism of Kant regarding the latter’s restriction of the validity of our modal concepts to phenomena and insistence on the unknowability of things in themselves from a pragmatist standpoint, without succumbing to a rationalist metaphysics of the concept. While acknowledging its hermeneutical successes in weaving Hegel’s metaphysical insights on conceptuality into pragmatic modal expressivism, Basmaci highlights some issues that may be encountered in Brandom’s approach, such as his potentially reductionistic “metalevel” concept of the noumenal world, which sets a unifying world picture in terms of scientific laws (Newtonian physics) as the standard for our objective knowledge claims. Brandom’s synthesis of semantic holism and modal expressivism may in fact entail scientific implications, insofar as individual knowledge claims seem to be set within a comprehensive meta-theoretical framework of the world, which is exemplarily articulated through the scientific laws of nature. Furthermore, Basmaci argues, Brandom’s approach neglects the role of objective teleology as a generator of conceptual content in Hegel’s own theory of conceptuality. Basmaci tries to deal with those problematic issues by arguing that Hegel’s concept of life not only aligns with Brandom’s objective idealism but would also enhance it, allowing Brandom to avoid skeptical, metaphysical, and scientific critiques of his conception. Basmaci offers this “ecological amendment” as a profitable extension of Brandom’s objective idealism beyond the scope of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one that allows us to appreciate its applicability to and consistency with Hegel’s logic and his philosophy of nature.

The following article by Stanul Grozev provides an interesting survey of the relationship between science and religion as it is presented in the works of three authors who contributed to the introduction of pragmatism in Bulgaria between 1902 and 1932: Georgi Minev, Asen Zlatarov, and Ivan Sarailiev. Georgi Minev was one of the
first promoters of pragmatism in Bulgaria, developing an accurate, if sometimes overenthusiastic account of James’s philosophy. Minev viewed science as a field of study which lacked the emotions that characterize genuine human existence, thus standing in opposition to the world of morality and religion. For him, science provides us with facts whose assessment can be performed properly only by religious experiences or other sorts of ethical approaches to human existence. Pragmatism – and especially the work of William James – was highly praised by Minev insofar as it may help to create a more understandable and intimate relationship between the human beings and the world they live in, to make their life better by reconciling reason, experience, and religion. While Minev used pragmatism as a platform from which to unleash his attacks against science, Asen Zlatarov, a strong defender of the validity of scientific inquiry, allowed a certain value to the ideas of pragmatism as long as they are not incompatible with a defense of the epistemic value of natural science. Zlatarov acknowledged that pragmatism was a compelling new philosophical doctrine supported by people who saw it as something akin to a new Renaissance in the field of philosophy. For him, pragmatism reestablished many valuable ideas that bear great similarity to the contemporary philosophical study of nature of which Zlatarov was a huge proponent, although he thought that some of the most important pragmatist thinkers defended their own personal religious aspirations. Finally, Grozev presents Ivan Sarailiev as a third intellectual who praised pragmatism in the early stage of its reception in Bulgaria. On May 5, 1931, Sarailiev delivered a public lecture presenting science and religion as two of the greatest creations of the human spirit. Both of them are adequate and necessary manifestations of our creative capabilities; both of them contribute to human life and there is nothing more sorrowful and fruitless than opposing one against the other. While admitting the enormous value of science for humanity, Sarailiev nevertheless maintained that scientific knowledge only barely touches the surface of things without reaching their essence. Based on the 20th-century confrontation between the religious and the scientific worldviews, it can be appreciated that at that time it was generally accepted that the conflict between science and religion had concluded with the final victory of science; but, on the other hand, the new scientific outlook also led to significant changes in the attitudes of the former defenders of scientism. Apparently, religion now received support even from the scientists themselves. Following James, Sarailiev argues that the resolution of the conflict between science and religion may serve as an example for the reconciliation of those other conflicts that lay within the boundaries of religion itself. Now that the scientists and the theologians, who Sarailiev collectively describes as the spiritual leaders of humanity, have reestablished religion as a meaningful part of our contemporary reality, they can unite their efforts in the overcoming of the obstacles for the peaceful coexistence of people with different religious beliefs.

The special issue continues with a pragmatist interpretation of Ian Hacking’s version of entity realism (ER), that is, the idea that if a scientist is able to use or manipulate an entity to produce or affect other phenomena, then the scientist accepts that entity as being real. Drawing on John Dewey’s influence on Hacking, Maja Sidzińska argues that ER should be understood as a pragmatist philosophy of science and she defends that this may allow that view to meet a series of five major objections which are commonly raised against it. Sidzińska’s defense of ER – especially of the version that Mauricio Suárez calls “metaphysical entity realism” (MER) – engages with some of the authors who have recently argued in favor of scientific realism (e.g. Ruey-Lin Chen and Hasok
Chang, among others), aiming to show that MER is a more compelling perspective on science than previously thought, one which, when understood as a pragmatist view, offers a genuine alternative to SR as well as to varieties of antirealism. At the end of her paper, Sidzińska also presents what she calls the “argument for technology” as an attempt to strengthen ER by showing our implicit commitment to the reality of entities that we manipulate ordinarily and on a daily basis through the available technology.

Also focused on a pragmatic interpretation of a classic approach to scientific knowledge is Pietro Gori’s contribution to this issue. Gori explores Thomas Kuhn’s late conception of incommensurable theories as collective structured lexicons and sets of kind terms that are not mutually translatable, defending the view that this conception may be unpacked in light of what he calls a “Wittgensteinian Pragmatism.” As recent literature has established, the broad approach to the issue of meaning as a matter of practice rather than mere theory that can be found in Wittgenstein’s late work, as well as his attempt to show that meanings are only possible against the background of our human form(s) of life, can be interpreted as a pragmatist attitude toward knowledge claims. In his paper, Gori defends the thesis that Kuhn’s engagement with lexicons is consistent with that attitude. On the one hand, it is possible to show that Kuhnian lexicons are genuinely conceived as Wittgensteinian forms of life, insofar as they are the background against which we can distinguish between true and false. On the other hand, the justification of lexicons is a matter of pragmatic assessment, for Kuhn, based on their efficiency as tools for achieving practical goals. The pragmatist character of Kuhn’s mature thought can also be appreciated if one considers that Kuhn’s focus is in fact primarily on how science is structured in practices that allow us to manipulate and change the world, with scant interest in the sort of knowledge that aims at increasingly accurate theoretical representations of the world. As Gori argues, Kuhn is interested in scientific research as it is actually practiced, and he thinks that justification and meaning can only be assessed within the boundaries of that practice. Consistent with this view, Kuhn conceives of structured lexicons as an important tool that scientists deploy in their engagement with the world and that, furthermore, conveys a shared ontology and evades epistemic commitments. In keeping with a Wittgensteinian pragmatism, Kuhn approached the issue of language with a primary interest in the practical plane of its use in an actual communication, and he maintained that the meaning of a world-picture arising from a lexicon can only be determined by that use.

The last paper published in this special issue provides us with a discussion of Arthur Fine’s “Natural Ontological Attitude” (NOA), that is, his attempt to outline a position that mediates between the extremes of realism and antirealism. Philip Good suggests that we should cease to think of Fine as a representative of mainstream attempts to dispense with the realism-antirealism issue and instead view NOA as an unfortunate mixture of opposed philosophical traditions. To defend his view, Good thoroughly considers four problems related to Fine’s NOA and focuses especially on Fine’s engagement with neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. According to Fine, pragmatists both old and new are “truthmongers,” another species of antirealists, insofar as at the core of their conceptions of truth we can find the idea that the truth of a statement P amounts to the fact that a certain class of subjects would accept P under a certain set of circumstances. However, Good argues that Fine’s criticism of Rorty and Putnam is misplaced, and makes the case that a pragmatist approach to Fine’s NOA can
be helpful to dismiss at least some of the problems that can be ascribed to that conception.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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