Nicholas Rescher
Epistemic Pragmatism
And Other Studies in the Theory of Knowledge

Nicholas Rescher

Epistemic Pragmatism

And Other Studies in the Theory of Knowledge

Contents

For Joseph Pitt
In cordial friendship

PREFACE

The core of pragmatism lies in the concept of functional efficacy—of utility in short. And epistemic pragmatism accordingly focuses on the utility of our devices and practices in relation to the aims and purposes of the cognitive enterprise—answering questions, resolving puzzlement, guiding action. The present book revolves around this theme.

The studies collaborated here were mostly written during 2007–2008. All of them bear on epistemological topics which have preoccupied me for many years, an interest first manifested in print over fifty years ago in my 1957 paper "On Prediction and Explanation" (*British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 8 [1957]). Much as with the thematic structure of this book, this interest expanded from an initial concern with the exact sciences, to encompass the epistemology of the human sciences, and ultimately the epistemology of philosophy itself.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for her patient and competent work in preparing this material for the press.

<div style="text-align: right">

Nicholas Rescher
Pittsburgh, PA
June 2008

</div>

EPISTEMIC PRAGMATISM

1. CONSEQUENTIALISM AND FUNCTIONALISTIC PRAGMATISM

Consequentialism, broadly understood, is the strategy of arguing for or against a measure—a practice, program, or policy—on the basis of the good (fortunate) or bad (unfortunate) consequences that would ensue from its implementation. So understood, consequentialism can take any of the four forms indicated in Display 1.

Display 1

MODES OF CONSEQUENTIALISM

Merit of Consequences	Recipient of Consequences	Description of the Mode
Good	The individual agent	Positive personal consequentialism
Good	The environing society	Positive social consequentialism
Bad	The individual agent	Negative personal consequentialism
Bad	The environing society	Negative social consequentialism

Several modes of consequentialism have historically been in particular prominent in philosophy. One relates to the justification of morality, where positive personal consequentialism has been advocated both in a spiritual version (Plato) and a crasser, more narrowly self-advantaged version (moral egoism).

A further historically influential version of consequentialism relates to the utilitarianism of the school of Bentham, and Mill, which adopts positive social consequentialism as the proper standard for adjudging matters of law and public policy.

Yet another historically influential mode of consequentialism is pragmatism as prominent in American philosophy since the days of Peirce and the early Dewey. Oriented particularly towards issues of cognitive practices, it

sees the proper standard of practical adequacy as a matter of working out successfully in realizing the aims and goals for which the community's theoretical and practical procedures have been instituted. Such a pragmatism is accordingly an approach to philosophical issues whose standard of appraisal proceeds in terms of purposive efficacy. On this basis a functionalistic pragmatism that looks to human endeavor in a purposive light can encompass the entire range of human concern.

Such a pragmatism is not (and should not be) regarded as a materialistic doctrine concerned only for crass payoffs. After all, man is a purposive animal. Almost everything that we do has an aim or end. Even play, idleness, and tomfoolery has a purpose—to divert, to provide rest and recreation, to kill time. And certainly our larger projects in the realm of human endeavor are purposive:

—*Inquiry*: to resolve doubt and to guide action.

—*Ethics*: to encourage modes of conduct in human interactions that canalize these into a generally satisfactory and beneficial form.

—*Law*: to establish and enforce rules of conduct.

—*Education*: to acculturate the younger generation so as to enhance the prospect that young people will find their way to personally satisfying and communally beneficial lifestyles.

—*Art*: to create objects or object types that elicit personally rewarding and enlightening experiences.

We are committed to such projects as the pursuit of nourishment, of physical security, of comfort, of education, of sociability, of rest and recreation, etc., designed to meet our requirements for food, shelter, clothing, knowledge, companionship, realization, etc., and equipment with its own complex of needs and desiderata. And throughout this manifold we have at our disposal one selfsame rationale of end-realization with its inherent involvement with issues of effectiveness and efficiency. Pragmatism's concern for functional efficiency, for success in the realization of ends and purposes, is an inescapable determinative standard for an intelligent being's way of making its way in the world. In such a purposive setting, the

pragmatic approach with its concern for functional efficacy is a critical aspect of rationality itself.

Pragmatism is thus a multi-purpose resource. Its approach to validation can of course be implemented in pretty much *any* purposive setting. Given any aim or objective whatever, we can proceed in matters of validation with reference to effectiveness and efficiency in the realization of purposes. However, a really thorough pragmatism must dig more deeply. It cannot simply take purposes as given—as gift horses into whose mouths we must not look. For purpose-adoption too has to be viewed in a pragmatic perspective as an act or activity of sorts that itself stand in need of legitimation. Accordingly, a sensible pragmatism also requires an *axiology of purposes*, a normative methodology for assessing the legitimacy and appropriateness of the purposes we espouse. Even our purposes themselves have their purposive aspect with a view to ulterior benefits.

To be sure, functionalistic pragmatism does not tell us what human purposes are mandated by the situation of homo sapiens in the world's scheme of things. That has to come from other sorts of investigations—inquiries that are effectively factual. But what it does do on this basis is to deploy a cogent standard of normative adequacy via the customary demands of practical rationality: effectiveness and efficiency in the realization of appropriate goals. Pragmatic efficacy is a salient arbiter of rational adequacy.

The justifactory impetus of functionalistic pragmatism bears directly and immediately upon anything that is of an instrumental nature. And on this basis, it applies to:

—our cognitive processes of truth validation and question-resolution,

—our practice-guiding and act-recommending norms for practical decision,

—our methods and procedures by which the endorsement of scientific hypotheses is validated.

The deliberations of functionalistic pragmatism accordingly have a methodological bearing—one that makes its impact upon methods rather than results, upon process rather than product. But, of course, since the processes at issue are product-productive processes, these deliberations will have an important *indirect* bearing on issues of product as well.

The rational validation of functionalistic pragmatism is thus something that is comparatively straightforward. For the approach at issue is validated through the consideration that its modus operandi is based on the principle: "In all matters of purposive action—select that among alternative processes and procedures which, as best you can tell, will enable you to reach the objectives at issue in the most effective and efficient way."

2. THE PRAGMATIC MODE OF TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTION

Functionalistic pragmatism looks to effectiveness and efficiency in realizing the aims and purposes inherent in various human enterprises and endeavors. But one particularly salient factor here relates to those purposes that are not optional for us, but rather are mandatory and inherent in our needs and natural desires as the sorts of beings we humans in fact are.

The fundamental thesis at issue here bears upon what might be called a Pragmatic Mode of Transcendental Deduction whose line of thought runs as follows:

- In virtue of our natural condition, we humans have such-and-such needs and natural desires. (This is simply a "fact of life"—a contingent fact about the world's realities.)

- These needs are of such a sort that as a matter of principle for them to be satisfiable requires something (Z) to be the case as forming part of "the conditions under which alone these needs and natural desires can be met".

- Therefore: Taking Z to be the case is rationally appropriate.

On this basis one could articulate, for example, transcendental arguments against such extreme doctrines as solipsism, radical scepticism, or cognitive anarchism.

Note that the preceding argumentation proceeds in the practical rather than the theoretical order of reason. For it argues pragmatically to what it is rationally sensible to accept rather than evidentially to what is actually the case. That is, it validates accepting something (viz. Z) as a presupposition (or sine-qua-non requirement) of the only condition under which a need or natural desire of ours can be satisfied. Dismissing the counsel of despair, this line of reasoning effectively has it that we are rationally entitled—in

the practical order of reason—to accept any presupposition of a *sine qua non* requisite of the meetability of our human needs or desires. What we have here is, interestingly, a sort of marriage of convenience between Kantian transcendentalism and pragmatism.

Traditionally philosophy has been divided into a practical and a theoretical sphere, distinguishing issues of cognition from issues of action as reflected in the belief-desire approach to explaining human action.

But a very different perspective is also available that sees cognition—the quest for and consideration of information—as itself a mode of practice. Rational inquiry is now viewed as a practical endeavor, a purposive enterprise, and even theorizing can be seen as a purposive endeavor whose aim has in the answering of our questions with a view to information gap-filling and applicative guidance. For the fact is that our beliefs are what they are because we have certain desires, viz. (1) to have answers to our questions (to remove the discomfort of knowing), and (2) to have answers we can see as credible—answers that satisfy various requirements we deem essential to adequacy (groundedness, reliability, contextual fit, etc.). On such a perspective, the belief/desire contrast does not provide for a belief/desire *separation* but rather leaves room for a *coordination* of these factors into one seamless whole.

Consider as an illustration of this processes of argumentation, namely the special case of knowledge—of information management. As beings of the sort we are, we humans need to acquire and communicate information and, life being short, communally conducted inquiry into the ways of a shared world is a *sine qua non* for us. The cognitive explanation of shared, objective experience and interpersonal communication about it is thus a situational requisite for us. The postulation of an observationally accessible and interpersonally shared environment—naturalistic realism in short—is mandatory for us, and its validity is a requisite for rather than a fruit of observational experience. Just this consideration affords a transcendental deduction of its validity in the pragmatic order of reason.

3. THE ASPECT OF REASON

The here-envisioned functionalistic version of pragmatism regards effective praxis as the proper arbiter of appropriate theorizing. It takes considerations of purposive effectiveness to provide a test-standard for the adequacy—alike in theoretical and in practical matters. Effective implementation is its pervasive standard of adequacy. And here its logical

starting point is the uncontroversial idea that the natural and sensible standard of approval for something that is in any procedural—anything that has an aspect that is methodological, procedural, instrumental—lies in the question of its successful application. Anything that has a teleology—that is an instrumentality for the realization of certain purposes—will automatically stand subject to an evaluation standard that looks to its efficacy. For whenever something is in any way purposively oriented to the realization of certain ends, the natural question for its evaluation in this regard is that of its serviceability in end-realization. Pragmatic efficacy becomes the touchstone of adequacy.

The close connection between functional efficacy and rationality must be stressed in this context. In any context where the satisfaction of needs and/or the realization of goals is at issue, a rational creature will prefer whatever method process or procedure will—other things equal—facilitate goal realization in the most effective, efficient, and economical way. In this way economic rationality is a definitive dimension of rationality-in-general and thereby endows functional efficacy with a normative aspect.

Cognitive and practical rationality constitute a unified whole. Cognition itself has its practical dimension. For cognition is an investment. It has costs and benefits, risks and rewards. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. To have information we must accept propositions and claims—buy in on them, so to speak. And the benefits we receive are just that—information, knowledge, consensus to our questions, the diminution of ignorance and unknowing. But there are also significant costs, which in the main come down to one thing—the risk of falling into error, getting things wrong, looking foolish in the eyes of our fellows.

Immanuel Kant spoke of "the crooked timber of humanity." But the timber of reality is every bit as warped, and the project we pursue and the processes we use to implement them must be carried through to perfection. A sort of engineering that we can copy out in the real world can determine a perfect flawless product into our hands. The contrast between the ideal world and the real is inescapable.

And this is just as true in cognitive as in physical engineering. No realizable program of knowledge development can determine perfection into our hands, can provide us with truths absolute, definitive, detailed, irrefragable. The risks of error and imperfection is inescapable.

4. PRAGMATIC APPROPRIATENESS AND COGNITION

The core and crux of pragmatic validation lies in its taking a functionalistic perspective. Its validating *modus operandi* proceeds with reference to the aims and ends of whatever happens to be the enterprise at issue. The aim of the enterprise of inquiry is to get answers to our questions. And not just answers but answers that can warrantedly be seen as being appropriate through success in matters of explanation and application. And so on pragmatic grounds the rational thing to do in matters of inquiry is to adopt that policy which is encapsulated in the idea that answers to a question for which one need/want an answer—for which the available evidence speaks most strongly is to be accepted until such time as something better comes along.

In line with this perspective, a realistic pragmatism insists upon pressing the question: "If *A* were indeed the correct answer to a question *Q* of ours, what sort of evidence could we possibly obtain for this?" And when we actually obtain such evidence—r at least as much of it as we can reasonably be expected to achieve—then pragmatism enjoins us to see this as sufficient. ("Be prepared to regard the best that can be done as good enough" is one of pragmatism's fundamental axioms.) If it looks like a duck, waddles like a duck, quacks like a duck, and so on, then, so pragmatism insists, we are perfectly entitled to stake the claim that it is a duck—at any rate until such time as clear indications to the contrary come to light. Once the question "Well what more could you reasonably ask for?" meets with no more than hesitant mumbling, then sensible pragmatists say: "Feel free to go ahead and make the claim." While the available information is all too incomplete and imperfect (as fallibilism cogently maintains), nevertheless, in matters of inquiry (of seeking for answers to our questions) we can never do better than to accept that answer for which the available evidence speaks most strongly—or at least to do so until such time as something better comes along.

It is not that truth *means* warranted assertability, or that warranted assertability *guarantees* truth. What is the case, rather, is that evidence here means "evidence *for truth*" and (methodologically) warranted assertability means "warrantedly assertable *as true*." After all, estimation here is a matter of truth-estimation, and where the conditions for rational estimation are satisfied we are—ipso facto—entitled to let that estimates stand surrogate to the truth. And in these contexts there is no point in asking for the impossible. The very idea that the best we can do is not good enough for all rele-

vantly reasonable purposes is—so pragmatism and common sense alike insist—simply absurd, a thing of unreasonable hyperbole. Whatever theoretical gap there may be between warrant and truth is something which the very nature of concepts like "evidence" and "rational warrant" and "estimation" authorizes us in crossing.

And so at this point we have in hand the means for resolving the question of the connection between thought and reality that is at issue with "the truth." The mediating linkage is supplied by heeding the *modus operandi* of inquiry. For cognition is a matter of *truth estimation*, and a properly effected estimate is, by its nature as such, something that is entitled to serve, at least for the time being and until further notice, as a rationally authorized surrogate for whatever it is that it is an estimate of.

Consider the following dialogic exchange:

Q: Why should we adopt the policy at issue?

A: Because it is the best one can do in the circumstances.

Q: But why shall I regard the best I can do as good enough?

A: Well, it certainly is not necessarily correct. But the fact remains that it is the best one can do, and that is all that you can (rationally) call for.

Q: But is this line of reasoning not circular. Are you not in effect insisting for its validation that very policy whose validation is in question?

A: That's true enough. But that's exactly how matters should be.

Q: How can you claim this? Is the argumentation not improper on grounds of self-innovation and self-reliance—that is, on grounds of vicious circularity?

A: No. The circularity is there alright. But there is nothing vicious about it. IT is self-supportive and thus is exactly what a thoroughly rational mode of validation should be. For where rationality is involved, self-supportingness is a good thing and circularity is not only unproblematic but desirable. Who would want a de-

fense of reason that is not itself reasonable? Reason and rationality not only can but must be called upon to speak upon their own behalf.

Thus insofar as inquiry into the nature of the real is a matter of truth estimation, the process at issue is and must be one that enjoys reason's "Good Housekeeping" seal of approval. For of course rational acceptance cannot be random, fortuitous, haphazard; it must be done in line with rules and regulations, with programs and policies attuned to the prospects of realizing the objectives inherent in the situation at hand.

5. ON THE VALIDITY OF PURPOSES

To be sure, a pragmatic position will meet with the objection: "Surely efficacy in goal-attainment cannot count for all that much. Surely we have to worry about the rationality of ends as well as the rationality of means! Surely there is no sense in pursuing—however effectively—an end that is absurd, counter-productive, harmful."

Quite right! There is good common sense—and indeed even sound rationality—to such a view of the matter. But, of course it is far from being the case that all ends are created equal—that giving people needless pain, say, is every bit as appropriate as helping them avoid injury.

However, this is an issue that a well-developed pragmatism, one which is altogether true to itself, needs to and can address through its own resources. And the terms of reference at issue here will in the natural course of things have to be those of philosophical anthropology. We are humans, members of *Homo sapiens*—that is an inescapable given for us. And given along with it are the conditions needed by us humans to lead not just *survivable* lives (requiring air, food, and shelter) but also those conditions needed by us to live *satisfying* lives (requiring self-respect, companionship and a feeling of communal belonging, and a sense of control over major elements of our life, and the like). And the pragmatic validation of aims and purposes can be established pragmatically in point of their efficiency and effectiveness in the realization of such life-maintaining and life-enhancing requirements that are mandated to us by our position in the world's scheme of things.

Some aims and purposes are optional—we choose them freely. But others are mandatory—built into the very fabric of our existence within nature as members of homo sapiens. These non-optional goals and purposes will

obviously have to play a pivotal role in a functionalistic pragmatism built on that paramount demand of reason: efficacy in goal attainment. The correlative requisites are manifold for us—not just food, shelter, and clothing alone, but also information and comprehension. For the fact of it is that human beings not only have wants, wishes, and desires, but have *needs* as well. And as beings of the sort we in fact are, we have many of them. Individually we need nourishment, physical security, and congenial interaction if our physical and psychological well-being is to be achieved and maintained. Collectively we require social arrangements that maximize the opportunities for mutual aid and minimize those for mutual harm. This aspect of the practical scheme of things is built into our very condition as the sorts of creatures we are and the place we have in nature's scheme of things.

This state of affairs endows functionalistic pragmatism with a second dimension of objectivity. On the one hand it is perfectly objective and nowise a matter of preference what sorts of means are effective in the realization of specified objectives. And on the other hand it is analogously perfectly objective and nowise a matter of preference that humans have certain needs—certain requirements that must be satisfied if they are to exist, persist, and function effectively as the sorts of creatures they have evolved as being on the world's stage.

By virtue of their very nature as purposive instrumentalities, value claims can and generally do fall within the domain of reason. For values are functional objects that have a natural teleology themselves, namely that of helping us to lead lives that are personally satisfying (meet our individual needs) and communally productive (facilitate the realizations of constructive goals to the community at large). This circumstance has far-reaching implications because it indicates that our assessment of values themselves can and should be ultimately pragmatic with want duly coordinated with needs. Our evaluations are appropriate only insofar as their adoption and cultivation are efficiently and effectively conducive to the realization of human interests—the rationally appropriate ends—personal and communal—that root in our place in nature's scheme of things.

Accordingly, a pragmatism that is consistent, coherent, and self-sustaining will not just proceed pragmatically with respect to achieving *unevaluated* ends and purposes, but must also apply its pragmatic perspective to the issue of validating ends and purposes themselves in terms of their capacity to facilitate the realization of those conditions whose beneficial realization is, for us humans, simply a "fact of life." A pragmatically based epistemology is thus altogether "realistic."[1]

NOTES

[1] Further material relevant to deliberations of this chapter can be found in the author's *Studies in Pragmatism*, Vol. II of *Nicholas Rescher: Collected Papers* (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2005).