



Robert Schwartz, "Pragmatic Perspectives: Constructivism Beyond Truth and Realism"

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Robert Schwartz, *Pragmatic Perspectives: Constructivism Beyond Truth and Realism*. Routledge 2020. 204 pp. \$128.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138049116); \$39.16 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781032177687)

In this highly insightful book, Robert Schwartz dispels misunderstandings about pragmatism that have arisen, especially in the tradition of analytic philosophy. The classic pragmatists in particular, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, but also pragmatists in general, continue to be misinterpreted as being subjectivist, anti-realist, philosophers who reject a mind-independent reality and deny any possibility for absolute truth. As noted in the book, both James and Dewey believed that their philosophies were more critiqued than understood, and Schwartz effectively brings that to light. This book is divided into four parts, analyzing pragmatism and these misconceptions within the areas of epistemology, aesthetics, metaphysics, ethics, and perception.

Part one begins with what is arguably one of the most insightful chapters of the book: an analysis of what happened to pragmatism, providing the background for why pragmatism has long been ignored, especially in the analytic tradition. The major misconceptions are addressed, such as how the pragmatists are neither strict relativists, nor subjectivists, and how their account of inquiry is not discordant with the scientific method. This is a major misunderstanding because their account of inquiry is, in fact, meant to be precisely in line with the scientific method in considering how the best we can be sure to achieve in our inquiries are hypotheses. Some hypotheses are of course stronger than others, but they all need continual testing because the possibility remains for a hypothesis to be disproven in the future, as fallibilism is inherent in the pragmatist tradition. This is often misconstrued as pessimistic when it is in fact optimistic because it leads to greater practicality by focusing on not wasting time on inquiries that are not sufficiently beneficial to explore. An important connection is made between the decline of pragmatism and the growth of analytic philosophy (Schwartz specifically references the upsurge of logical positivism), as the latter is considered to be more apt for professionalizing the discipline.

Part one also covers epistemology in more detail. It discusses how the central epistemic concern from a pragmatist perspective is to expound on the nature of inquiry itself; how inquiry itself functions. Knowing does not translate directly into understanding. Part of the epistemological focus of pragmatists is to ask *why* it is beneficial to accept and implement a certain view. As stated by Schwartz, truth is a matter of reference. Epistemological effort should avoid exploring inquiries that will not prove to be useful. In this, however, they are not *completely* rejecting the correspondence theory—another common misconception—rather, they are emphasizing instrumentalism as a means of navigation and organization for inquiry. This is because inquiry results in warranted belief based on the available evidence—it could be accurate, or not; we could be getting closer to the truth, or not; but accepted truth is the best and realistically all we can be confident about. We can continually test our theories to see if they are useful instruments, and it is indeed meaningful to discuss getting *closer* to truths. Pragmatists strive to clarify relationships, such as with dualisms. Pragmatists are not strictly empiricists nor idealists; rather, they offer a position of compromise.

Part two discusses constructivism and aesthetics. Part of the presentation for this part is vividly done via a dialogue of criticisms and replies. The pragmatist emphasis on reconstruction is explored here through examples in art; we participate in making art in some ways similar to how we participate in making our reality, neither of which is in a complete way, such as the example cited of how a sculptor does not make the marble but makes the sculpture. Making something from



scratch, Schwartz explains, does not mean beginning with literally nothing: 'worldmaking is always *remaking*' (90), as making has to come from something existent. There is an insightful exploration in this section regarding the pragmatist perspective on how we are perceiving things in the world and at the same time playing a role in making our own worlds. Pictures, such as in art, are a manifestation of this. The author cites an effective example from Picasso: his statement in response to critics of his portrait of Gertrude Stein that if one does not think it looks like her, they will come to think so eventually. 'Real likeness' is a pragmatic matter determined by which properties the viewers and/or artists view as prominent, and which characteristics are seen as useful, because we cannot see *everything*. Art does not completely mirror reality, we do not completely make reality; rather, we participate in *useful* making and *re-making* in the same way that 'science invents the world in the process of discovering it' (102). The mind and mental states must be understood functionally.

Part three connects pragmatism to values and ethics. This section discusses how moral inquiry should be helpful: it should settle those particular problems which lead to useful answers. Again, just because the best we can do is really the most we can do, this is not meant to be pessimistic, rather it is a highly optimistic and realistic position that focuses our efforts on what we can progress. Judgments should be made on how much progress is made, not on reaching an eternal perfection. As Schwartz reminds us, what is possible and what is the primary goal, from a pragmatist perspective, is *improvement*. Better is still good, even if it is not necessarily the best, and this applies directly to morality: it is about improving human social relations and how we live together. Abstract ethical principles become meaningful when they can be applied to a problematic situation. From a pragmatist perspective, it is important to study how statements of facts, values, and ethical principles are human constructs. As Schwartz reiterates 'construction, then, is always a matter of *re-construction*' (128), thus, we must continually examine how they function in our lives and in scientific inquiry. Pragmatic constructivists are not only functionalists, but also anti-foundationalists and fallibilists.

Part four relates pragmatism to the topic of perception. There is a very important discussion, often overlooked, of the pragmatist notions within George Berkeley's philosophy in defining his position, as Peirce does, as 'conditional idealism.' Veridicality is argued to be a matter of the correlation or relation of ideas. There is no one complete way to see, describe, or understand the world, because to assess veridicality in perception, we must assess what meaning that experience has for the perceiver from a pragmatist perspective. Moreover, we experience perceptual spatial mismatches, which, even if they do not always have a direct relevance in our day-to-day lives, can still limit our ability to be accurate. Schwartz also discusses the question of whether some perceptions of color should be labelled 'veridical,' 'illusory' or 'constant.' Trouble arises when we try to characterize perceptions of reality in a single way, so the pragmatic account provides a useful and realistic framework for studying perception.

This book is critical for demonstrating not only how pragmatism has been misconstrued, but also how to understand the philosophical tradition appropriately. He rightly explains how pragmatism should not be taken as pessimistic; on the contrary, it is highly optimistic and provides an effective way to manage skepticism and philosophical dilemmas. From a pragmatic instrumentalist view, a main focus is on exploring why it is useful, meaningful, and beneficial to adopt a certain view or pursue a specific line of inquiry, whether epistemological, aesthetic, metaphysical, ethical, or perceptual.

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