

Undoing the Truth Fetish: The Normative Path to Pragmatism

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What is pragmatism? I don't know of a succinct definition. The term encompasses a cluster of ideas associated with the American philosophical tradition running from Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, through figures such as Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty, to contemporary thinkers such as Philip Kitcher and Cheryl Misak.¹ But a central theme is a shift away from truth and onto *us*; onto our interests, practices, and needs. This yields distinctive views on a range of topics about the nature of inquiry, truth, justification, and meaning. Thus, while scientific inquiry is often said to aim at truth, pragmatists see it more as something that makes our lives better. Insofar as inquiry can be said to have an "aim" at all, pragmatists tend to see it as something internal to our interests and practices; they reject the idea of an external, human-independent standard of "objective truth" to which inquiry aims. When they do talk of truth, therefore, pragmatists typically deny that it consists in "correspondence with reality" or anything of that ilk. That leaves open what truth *is*, exactly, but a common theme is a rejection of any notion of truth as an objective constraint on inquiry over and above our epistemic practices. And what justifies the methods we use in inquiry, such as induction? While some philosophers think they're justified insofar as they track truth, pragmatists disagree. For if there is no standard of truth over and above our epistemic practices, then our practices come first and must be justified, if at all, independently of truth. Thus we see Goodman (1955) "justifying" induction in terms of our practices, as something we do, not by measuring it against truth. As for linguistic meaning, pragmatists tend to find truth-conditions and related notions like reference and representation unilluminating and focus more on how language is actually used in practice. These then are four core theses of the pragmatist tradition:

Pragmatist conception of inquiry:

The aim of inquiry (insofar as there is such a thing) is internal to our interests and practices.

Pragmatist conception of truth:

Truth is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices.

Pragmatist conception of justification:

Our methods of inquiry are justified, if at all, in terms of our practices.

Pragmatist conception of meaning:

Meaning is nothing over and above actual linguistic practice.

I used to find all this ridiculous. Isn't it *obvious* that truth is one thing and our epistemic practices another? Surely there is some truth as to the exact number of brontosaurus that ever lived, even if we could never find out what it is! Isn't it equally clear that climatology should aim to find the *truth* about climate change, not just what suits us? And if truth is the aim, aren't our methods of inquiry justifiable only insofar as they lead to truth? As for the pragmatist conception

¹ Misak (2013) presents an illuminating history of this tradition.

of meaning, it seemed to me effectively refuted by the spectacular successes of recent truth-conditional semantics. In short, I was a “truther”: I thought that a human-independent notion of truth was central to philosophy and regarded these pragmatist theses as vestiges of an outdated naiveté.

Nonetheless, I’ve come to think that these pragmatist theses are right after all, and indeed that they follow from a normative claim which is widely accepted by contemporary truthers! My aim here is to chart out this normative path to pragmatism.

The normative claim is that truth is, in itself, normatively inert. Deflationists have long argued that it is *explanatorily* inert, but the claim is that even if truth is explanatory it nonetheless holds no intrinsic normative significance. Sections 1-3 explain what this claim means; sections 4-7 then show how it leads to the four pragmatist theses.

To be clear, my aim here is not to establish the normative claim itself. Instead, I will show in section 3 that many would-be truthers are already committed to it. I will also conclude in section 8 by describing the striking picture that results if you reject it. I find that picture incredible, so I embrace the normative claim and the pragmatism that follows. But opponents of pragmatism may instead read the paper as revealing the picture they are wedded to.

As we’ll see, the pragmatism I’ll develop is in some ways more and in other ways less of a departure from the truther view than you find in other pragmatists. More, insofar as it does not simply replace truth with *us*—the pragmatism I’ll develop places no normative significance on us *either*! But less, insofar as it can verify much of what truthers *say* about the role of truth. For this latter reason I call it “transcendental pragmatism”: it acknowledges a role for truth but situates it in a sea of human practices.² I won’t do much in terms of scholarship to compare this with the pragmatist tradition. Pragmatists come in many varieties and I suspect that some will regard this as not *real* pragmatism, while others will see me as merely retracing well-trodden pragmatist ground. To the latter I suggest that it is worth retracing this ground in terms that contemporary truthers will likely accept. And to the former I say that I don’t much care what we call it; my aim is to develop a distinctive position in the spirit of the pragmatist theses listed above.

1. How to go on

Our starting point is the Kripkensteinian question of how to go on.³ Consider the sign ‘+’. You’ve used it a finite number of times to write down calculations such as ‘ $5 + 7 = 12$ ’ and ‘ $17 + 8 = 25$ ’. Now you try calculating ‘ $68 + 57$ ’ for the first time, and imagine you’ve never calculated numbers greater than 50 before. What’s the answer? We think it’s obviously 125, but Kripke demurs. What’s obvious is that *if you mean addition by ‘+’* the answer is 125. But what if you mean *quaddition*? Quaddition is the function that maps two numbers to their addition when both are smaller than 50, and to 5 otherwise. If you mean quaddition, the answer to your calculation is 5! And Kripke’s “skeptical argument” purports to show that there is no fact of the matter whether you mean addition or quaddition. Your past usage of ‘+’ is consistent with both

² Thanks to Chris Peacocke for this evocative label.

³ Kripke (1982), Wittgenstein (1953).

meanings, by hypothesis, and Kripke argues that nothing else about you—your dispositions, intentions, etc.—suffices to determine what you mean either. Hence there is no fact of the matter which answer is correct. In Wittgensteinian terms, there is no “right” way to go on using ‘+’.

Why don’t your intentions suffice? If you *intended* to add, wouldn’t that entail that you mean addition? Perhaps, but that just moves the issue to the level of mental content, of whether your mental state counts as an intention to *add* or to *quadd*, and similar considerations purport to show that nothing about you settles *that*. If thought is prior to language (as I suspect it is), this is where the issue ultimately lies. But thought involves complexities that won’t matter for our purposes, so for simplicity I’ll assume that language is prior to thought and discuss the issue as it arises for language.⁴

The issue is whether there’s a *correct* answer to ‘68 + 57’, but this bears clarification. By the correct answer, I don’t mean the one you’d be justified in giving. If you mean addition by ‘+’, the correct answer is 125 even if you don’t justifiably believe so and even if you don’t *know* that you mean addition. Thus, the issue does not concern the epistemology of meaning or what “guides” one in applying an expression.⁵ Nor does it concern the mathematical facts about addition and quaddition—these are not in question. The issue, rather, is whether ‘+’ means addition or quaddition.

More precisely, the question is which of these is the correct answer:

- (A) $68 + 57 = 125$
- (B) $68 + 57 = 5$

Schematically, say that an assertion of a sentence ‘S’ is correct iff (i) ‘S’ means that p, and (ii) p. Condition (ii) isn’t at issue: I assume the mathematical facts that 68 added to 57 is 125, and that 68 quadded to 57 is 5. The issue concerns (i), of whether (A) means that 125 is the *addition* of 68 and 57 or their *quaddition*. If the former, (A) is the correct answer; if the latter, it isn’t. Kripke’s skeptical argument purports to show that there is no fact of the matter what (A) means and hence whether it’s the correct answer.

If you find talk of “meaning” obscure, we could instead say that an assertion of ‘S’ is correct iff (i) the correctness-condition of S is that p, and (ii) p. Then the issue again concerns (i), of whether (A) is correct iff 68 *added* to 57 is 125, or correct iff 68 *quadded* to 57 is 125. Here I’ll slide freely between meaning and correctness-conditions—by ‘meaning’ I mean only that expressions have conditions of correct and incorrect application. What Kripke’s skeptical argument purports to show is that the relevant facts about ‘+’ do not suffice to determine correctness-conditions; they do not fix the “right” way to go on.

⁴ This simplifying assumption is not uncontroversial. For example, McGinn (1984) argues that Kripke’s argument fails when applied to mental content; see Boghossian (1989) for a reply.

⁵ These are important issues, just not what I focus on here. See Miller (2001), Wright (2001a), and Merino-Rajme (2015) for further discussion of these issues in the context of Kripke’s text.

But if the issue is correctness, isn't this really an issue about *truth*? To be correct *just is* to be true, the thought is, so the meaning of a sentence must consist in its *truth*-condition. More carefully, the idea is that the following is a platitude about truth and correctness:

(CT) An assertion of a sentence 'S' is correct if and only if 'S' is true.⁶

If so, the issue really concerns (A)'s *truth*-condition; whether it is true iff 68 *added* to 57 is 125, or true iff 68 *quadded* to 57 is 125. And that depends whether '+' *refers* to addition or quaddition. What Kripke's skeptical argument purports to show, on this reading, is that no facts about '+' determine its referent.

Seen like this, the issue would apparently be solved by showing that certain facts about '+' *do* determine its referent after all. This would amount to what Field (1994) calls an "inflationary" theory of meaning, on which meaning consists (at least in large part) in reference and truth-conditions and the like. But I think this appearance is mistaken. Even if something does fix reference and truth-conditions *per* some inflationist theory, that in itself still doesn't fix the right way to go on!

2. The truth fetish

To see why, consider the inflationary theory associated with David Lewis (1984) on which reference is fixed by use plus naturalness. The idea is this. Suppose Kripke is right that addition and quaddition both fit your past usage of '+'. Still, not all functions are equal; some are more natural than others. Here we appeal to the metaphysical thesis that some entities (properties, relations, functions, whatever) are *perfectly natural*, and that amongst the rest some are *more natural* than others—green is more natural than grue, for example. Then the proposal is that the referent of an expression is whatever best satisfies the two constraints of fit with use and naturalness. If addition is more natural than quaddition, '+' refers to addition.

One can then define truth in terms of reference in the Tarskian manner. For example, a base clause might say that a sentence of the form 'a is F' is true iff the referent of 'a' has the property referred to by 'F'.⁷ Appropriately developed, this would imply that (A) is true iff the addition of 68 and 57 is 125. *Et voila*—(A) has a truth-condition after all!

On this theory, Kripke is right that facts about *you* don't suffice to fix reference. But reference isn't fixed just by you; it's fixed by you *and the world*, and the world helps determine that you refer to addition rather than quaddition. I said this theory is associated with Lewis, not that it is Lewis'—his considered view was more complex.⁸ Still, it's a simple example of an inflationary theory on which reference and truth-conditions are fixed by some mixture of use plus world. I claim that such theories are incomplete—by themselves they settle nothing about

⁶ This platitude could alternatively be formulated as a *norm* of assertion, perhaps expressed as an imperative: Assert a sentence 'S' only if 'S' is true! Those who prefer to think of the platitude as a norm are welcome to do so and interpret subsequent discussion of (CT) in that light. Others might prefer to think of the platitude as a scheme: An assertion of a sentence 'S' is correct if and only if S. I will discuss this scheme in section 4.3.

⁷ This is obviously a simplification—a more realistic theory might associate predicates with satisfaction-conditions or extensions instead of referents. But those details are not relevant here.

⁸ See Weatherson (2012), Schwarz (2014), and Williams (2015) for further discussion.

the correct way to go on using ‘+’! This Lewisian theory illustrates the point because of its simplicity.

To see this, assume that the theory works as advertised: addition is perfectly natural, so ‘+’ refers to addition. Still, if there’s a property of perfect naturalness that addition has and quaddition lacks, there’s also a property of perfect *quaturalness* that quaddition has and addition lacks. After all, properties are cheap—there’s a property for every set. At least, this was Lewis’ own view of properties, and likewise for relations and functions: there’s a relation for every set of n-tuples and a function for every univalent relation. He posited perfect naturalness to distinguish a select few of these entities from the rest. This works *to an extent*: it distinguishes those that are natural from the rest. But if properties are cheap, there’s also a property of perfect quaturalness that distinguishes a *different* set of entities from the rest. Addition may be perfectly natural, but quaddition is perfectly quatural!

So, if the relation of reference is fixed by use plus naturalness *per* the Lewisian theory, there’s also a relation of *queference* fixed by use plus *quaturalness* in a precisely analogous manner. The queferent of ‘+’ is that function which fits use and is most quatural, namely quaddition. Your expression ‘+’ stands in *both* relations at once: it *refers* to addition and *quefers* to quaddition at the very same time!⁹

And just as the Lewisian theory defined truth in terms of reference, there’s an analogous notion of *quuth* defined in terms of queference—the base clause would state that a sentence ‘a is F’ is *quue* iff the queferent of ‘a’ has the property queferred to by ‘F’. Thus, if the Lewisian theory implies that (A) is *true* iff 68 added to 57 is 125, then, equally, (A) is *quue* iff 68 quadded to 57 is 125. There is nothing contradictory here, for truth and quuth are different properties: (A) has a truth-condition *and* a quuth-condition at the very same time!

We started with a normative question of how to go on using ‘+’. When computing ‘68 + 57’ for the first time, what’s the *right* thing to say? What’s the *correct* answer? The hope was that the Lewisian theory settles this: if ‘+’ refers to addition, the answer is 125. But don’t be fooled, for it depends whether it’s right to go on in accordance with the referent of ‘+’ or its queferent. If the former, the answer is 125; but if the latter, it’s 5! Remember, both relations are out there: ‘+’ refers to addition *and* quefers to quaddition at the very same time. Thus, absent a further claim to the effect that reference is *normatively significant*—that reference (not queference) determines what counts as the *correct* way to go on—nothing in the Lewisian theory implies that the correct answer is 125.

Similarly for truth. The Lewisian theory implies that (A) is true and (B) is not. Still, (B) is *quue* and (A) is not. Which is the correct answer? That depends on whether the correct answer is the one that’s *true* or the one that’s *quue*, and the Lewisian theory as stated doesn’t say. Remember, both properties are out there: (A) is true *and* (A) is *not quue* at the very same time! Again, there is nothing contradictory here, for truth and quuth are different properties. Thus, absent a further claim to the effect that truth is *normatively significant*—that truth, not quuth, is

⁹ Stich (1990) makes a related point to the effect that ‘water’ stands in many relations at once to a number of chemical substances.

what determines the *correct* way to go on—the Lewisian theory implies nothing about which of (A) or (B) is the correct answer.

You might think the further claim is trivial. After all, we said that this is a platitude:

(CT) An assertion of a sentence ‘S’ is correct if and only if ‘S’ is true.

Does it not follow, trivially, that truth *as described by the Lewisian theory* is the standard of correctness? No—that is not playing fair. When we said that (CT) is a platitude, we did not have in mind any particular *theory* of truth. It is rather a *constraint* on an adequate theory of truth: that whatever truth is, it must be something that serves as the standard of correct assertion. The Lewisian theory says that truth is a certain property fixed by use plus naturalness, so the further claim needed is that *that property fixed by use plus naturalness* is the standard of correct assertion—this is not trivial at all. Simply *calling* that property ‘truth’, as the Lewisian theory did above, does not make it normatively significant in this regard any more than calling someone ‘Armstrong’ gives them large biceps (as Lewis himself quipped in another context).¹⁰

To avoid confusion, then, let us call the Lewisian property fixed by use plus naturalness *Lewisian-truth*, or *L-truth* for short (and, likewise, let’s call the Lewisian relation it is defined in terms of *L-reference*). Then the further claim is that *L-truth is normatively significant*—i.e. that L-truth is the standard that determines the correct way to go on. Again, this is not trivial in the slightest; and without it nothing follows about whether (A) is the correct answer.

This is not Putnam’s “just more theory” objection.¹¹ His point was that naturalness cannot be an extra constraint that helps fix reference along with fit with usage; there’s just fit with usage, which includes fit with our use of the term ‘naturalness’. But my point is the opposite. It’s not that there are no extra constraints, it’s that there are too many. There’s a constraint of naturalness that fixes L-reference, but there’s also a constraint of quaturalness that fixes queference. Without a further claim specifying which constraint is normatively significant, nothing follows about whether it’s correct to go on using ‘+’ according to its L-referent or its queferent.

Nor is this Kripke’s objection to dispositional theories of meaning. Kripke argued (i) that our dispositions run out too soon—beyond some limit we have no dispositions to use ‘+’ one way or another—and (ii) we can be disposed to use an expression incorrectly. The Lewisian theory employs naturalness to solve both problems: it fixes an L-referent even where our dispositions

¹⁰ Lewis was objecting to Armstrong’s anti-Humean view of laws. Elsewhere he objected similarly to anti-Humean views of objective chance: “posit all the primitive unHumean whatnots you like... But play fair in naming your whatnots. Don’t call any alleged feature of reality “chance” unless you’ve already shown that you have something, knowledge of which could constrain rational credence” (Lewis 1994, p. 484). Here the connection between chance and rational credence is analogous to (CT), a platitude that any acceptable theory of chance must meet. Lewis’ point is that it is not playing fair to call something “chance” until you’ve shown that it satisfies the platitude; my point in the text is that absent the further claim, the Lewisian theory isn’t playing fair. For further discussion of where Lewis doesn’t live up to his aspiration of playing fair, see Dasgupta (2018). For a more general discussion of the method of playing fair, see Dasgupta (2017).

¹¹ Putnam (1977) objected to a causal theory of reference along these lines; Lewis (1984) discussed how the objection would apply to the Lewisian theory under discussion. Thanks to Rohan Sud for a helpful discussion of this point.

run out, and (so fixed) the L-referent may diverge from our dispositions of use. I don't deny that naturalness does this work; my claim is that if it does, quaturalness also does a parallel job of fixing a queferent. Again, absent a further claim that L-reference is normatively significant, nothing follows about how to go on using '+'.¹²

The point is that L-truth is just one property fixed by one mixture of usage and the world. But quuth is another property fixed by a different mixture, and there are countless other mixtures besides. Which mixture is the standard of correctness, the one that determines the right way to go on? This is where the further claim is needed. To ignore this further claim and presume without question that it's the Lewisian mixture is to *fetishize* that mixture over the others. It is this fetish I want to undo. If you insist on using 'true' to label L-truth, fine—the point is that we must not fetishize truth.

I've discussed the Lewisian theory, but the same goes for any inflationist theory on which reference and truth-conditions are identified with some mixture of use plus world, whether that mixture involves causation, teleological functions, or even a *sui generis* property not reducible to the natural sciences. Whatever the mixture is, we must remember that mixtures of use plus world are cheap. In addition to causation there is quausation, a relation that overlaps with causation “around here” and diverges elsewhere. If our terms have referents fixed by some mixture involving causation, they also have queferents fixed by an analogous mixture involving quausation. Thus, it's not enough to identify some mixture of use plus world and call it “reference”, for mixtures are two-a-penny and the normative question remains as to which one determines the right way to go on.

3. Realism and anti-realism about meaning

To be clear, I haven't said that no mixture is normatively significant. Perhaps one of them is—perhaps even the Lewisian mixture. Whatever it is, the claim that *something* has this status of normative significance—i.e., of determining what counts as *the correct* way to go on—is what I'll call “realism” about meaning. By contrast, “anti-realism” is the view that nothing is normatively significant in this sense. This distinction is central to what follows, for anti-realism is the normative claim which, I'll argue, leads to our four pragmatist theses.

But first, we must clarify what realism (and therefore anti-realism) amounts to. One question concerns the *source* of normative significance. If a Lewisian realist says that L-truth is normatively significant, for example, what makes it so? Specifically, is it something about *us* that singles it out as significant over other standards, or does it have that significance anyway,

¹² When presenting this material I am sometimes asked about Warren's (2020) argument that dispositional theories can be rescued from Kripke's critique. Roughly, Warren develops the notion of a *singular* disposition, exercised in *normal* situations; by composing such dispositions over a range of situations, Warren argues that one can fix the desired relation of reference without appeal to naturalness. But my reaction to Warren is the same as my reaction to Lewis. It may be that Warren's recipe fixes a word-world relation that avoids Kripke's complaints. Still, there are other word-world relations fixed otherwise—some by composing dispositions differently, others by appeal to naturalness or quaturalness, and so on. Once again, without the further claim that the relation described by Warren is normatively significant, nothing follows about the correct way to go on. (Would Warren be happy adding the further claim? Perhaps; that depends on how one interprets section 4 of his paper. I will not speculate here about that exegetical question.)

independently of us? Both options are available the realist. Notice, though, that if something about us makes L-truth normatively significant, this something about us must itself be normatively significant also.

To see this, suppose the Lewisian realist says that L-truth is normatively significant over quuth because it serves our *interests*. Think of “interests” here as some gradable property of ours, such as health, which is promoted by L-truth—i.e., we tend to have more of it when we go on in accordance with L-truth rather than quuth. Well, in addition to interests we also have *quinterests*, a gradable property that is promoted by quuth. This is a strange property to which we pay little attention, but since properties are cheap we must have *some* such property.¹³ Thus, if our interests single out the standard of L-truth, then, equally, our quinterests single out the standard of quuth. For L-truth to be normatively significant over quuth, therefore, *interests* must already have normative significance over *quinterests*. If not, there’s nothing to distinguish our interests and the standard of L-truth they pick out as significant over our quinterests and the standard of quuth *they* pick out; neither is distinguished over the other as determining the correct way to go on, *contra* realism.

It’s worth distinguishing this kind of realist view, on which the normative significance of a worldly standard like L-truth stems from some (normatively significant) feature of *us*, from realist views on which it doesn’t. I’ll call the former kind of realism “anthropocentric” and the latter “full-blooded”. Anthropocentric realism includes views on which the relevant feature of ours involves our evolutionary history, our biological or psychological make-up, or our cultural heritage.¹⁴ The feature might be one that is possessed uniformly across humanity, or it might be one with respect to which there is variation. For example, suppose as above that *human interests* is the relevant feature, and suppose our interests are served by L-truth while another community has other interests better served by quuth. Then an assertion of ‘S’ is correct *for us* iff ‘S’ is L-true, and correct *for them* iff ‘S’ is quue. This is a relativism of sorts, though not a relativism about the standard of L-truth. Rather, it’s a relativism about *correctness*; about which standard determines the right way to go on. By contrast, full-blooded realism would maintain that one standard, say L-truth, is normatively significant independently of us. There is then no relativism: a sentence that is L-true is correct *period*, independent of anything about us.

Notice then that both realists can agree *that* L-truth, say, is the standard of correctness (*for us*, at least); the disagreement concerns *why* L-truth, not quuth, plays that role. This is worth marking with terminology. Semantics, let’s say, is the theory that assigns semantic values—referents, truth-conditions, etc.—to expressions. Meta-semantics is then the theory of what fixes the semantic value of an expression; the Lewisian theory that reference is fixed by use plus naturalness is an example. At the risk of multiplying hyphens, “meta-meta-semantics” is then the

¹³ To see this, note that the property of having certain interests can be represented by a mapping from persons to real numbers that increases as a function of the person’s health. Or more precisely: a function from possible worlds to such mappings that increases as a function of the person’s health in that world. So, take a function from possible worlds to such mappings that typically increases as a function of how many quuths the person asserts. If properties are cheap, this function represents *some* gradable property of persons (this is just the idea that every set of possibilia corresponds to a property, adjusted to the case of gradable properties).

¹⁴ The only restriction is that it cannot involve linguistic meaning (since this is a theory of what meaning *is*) or mental content (because of my simplifying assumption that language is prior to thought). If we instead assumed that thought is prior to language, we’d have the same restrictions.

theory of why semantic values *matter*; of why reference and truth-conditions, not queference and quuth-conditions, serve as the standard of correctness. It's the theory that explains why semantics is in the business of assigning referents rather than queferents in the first place. Full-blooded and anthropocentric realism are theories of meta-meta-semantics, of whether reference and truth-conditions matter independently of us or because of us.

That's realism. Anti-realism, then, is the view that nothing has this status of being normatively significant—not even in the anthropocentric sense of inheriting its normative significance from us. If our interests distinguish the standard of L-truth, our quinterests will distinguish the standard of quuth and there is nothing that privileges interests over quinterests. *Every* standard is distinguished by *something* about us; none of them is normatively significant over the rest. All standards are on a par.

It follows that there is no objective possibility of going on in error. Suppose our interests and quinterests are served by L-truth and quuth, respectively. And imagine another community, the Quusters, who have the very same interests and quinterests as we do. The only difference is that we go on in accordance with L-truth, promoting our interests, while they go on in accordance with quuth, promoting their quinterests. We say ' $68 + 57 = 125$ ', they say ' $68 + 57 = 5$ '. Both ways of going on satisfy *some* standard that serves *something* about us, and according to anti-realism that is all there is to say. There is nothing to break the symmetry; nothing that privileges one way of going on over the other. What *realism* does, in effect, is posit a symmetry-breaker—something in virtue of which one community counts as going on incorrectly. Perhaps *interests*, not quinterests, are normatively significant and determine the right way to go on (anthropocentric realism). Or perhaps *L-truth*, not quuth, is normatively significant regardless of anyone's interests (full-blooded realism). But according to anti-realism, there is no special property of ours or the world that distinguishes one way of going on as right and the other wrong. At bottom, we just *do what we do*. If we happen to go on in a way that promotes our interests, that is just an empirical fact about us. To go on differently, promoting our quinterests instead, would not be a *mistake*, just a different way of life.

Still, this does not mean that we must eliminate all talk of correctness. As we go on one way or another, we will tend to *treat that as* “the correct” way to go on. If we go on to say ' $68 + 57 = 125$ ', for example, we'll treat that as correct at least in the minimal sense of being *the thing to say*, or *the way to use* '+'. We'll teach others to say the same thing, correct them when they don't, and so on. Thus, when the Quusters go on differently we will *say* that they are wrong and we are right. This is a perfectly legitimate epistemic practice, according to anti-realism—a perfectly legitimate way of using '+' and evaluating the usage of others.¹⁵ Hence there's an “internal” sense in which *we* can evaluate the Quusters as going on in error: they are incorrect “by the lights of our epistemic practice”, as I'll put it. But of course, the Quusters can with equal legitimacy accuse *us* of error in return, and the point in the last paragraph is that there is no further fact as to who is “really” right, no “external” basis by which to break the symmetry. One way of going on is correct *by the lights of our epistemic practices*, another way of going on is correct *by the lights of their epistemic practices*, and there is no further fact as to which way of going on is correct *by the lights of reality*, so to speak. There is no *objective* standard of correctness, that is, over and above correctness by the lights of these or those epistemic practices.

¹⁵ For anti-realists, how could it *not* be?!

This might sound like anthropocentrism, but it's not. On that view, there *is* an objective standard of correctness in the relevant sense. Admittedly, that standard is determined by some feature of thinkers, such as their *interests*, and so might vary from community to community. But still, it's an objective fact about *any* community that whatever serves *their interests* is the standard of correctness *for them*. Since the Quusters' interests are (by hypothesis) best served by *L-truth*, that is the standard of correctness *for them* and they go on *incorrectly* (for them) when they go on in accordance with quuth. In that sense there is an objective standard of correctness over and above *what they treat as correct*. But according to anti-realism there is no such thing. If you like, there is no such thing as correctness—not *really*, not *objectively speaking*—not even correctness relative to a community. There is just our epistemic practice of *treating something as correct*, and no further fact of the matter as to whether it *really is correct*—not even relative to us. As I put it, there is no *objective* standard of correctness over and above correctness by the lights of these or those epistemic practices.

But this leads straight the pragmatist conception of truth we started with! Recall our platitude:

(CT) An assertion of a sentence 'S' is correct if and only if 'S' is true.

This is a constraint on a theory of truth: whatever we mean by 'true', it must be a standard of correct assertion. But for anti-realists, this cannot be an *objective* standard of correctness in the above sense, for there is no such thing—it cannot be anything over and above correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices. Hence,

Pragmatist conception of truth:

Truth is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices.

There is much more to say about what this *means*, and what we *do* (or *could*) mean by 'true'. I will discuss this in section 4. For now, let us simply register that anti-realism implies *something* along these lines.

Those who wish to avoid this pragmatist conclusion must therefore endorse the realist view that one standard is normatively significant over the rest. No problem, you might think! The trouble is, realism implies *normative primitivism*, the view that normativity is a *sui generis*, irreducible component of reality over and above the natural (and super-natural) world order.¹⁶ Specifically, something's being normatively significant is not reducible to natural facts about the cosmos or even to super-natural facts about God and the divine. This may not be obvious. If a Lewisian realist says that L-truth is normatively significant, for example, why must this be irreducible? Why couldn't it hold in virtue of something else? Well, it could. But if so we'll find primitive normativity elsewhere. To see this, suppose the realist says that L-truth is normatively significant because it serves our *interests*, or because it's defined in terms of *naturalness*. Whatever the details, the idea is that L-truth has some property P_L (of serving our interests, or

¹⁶ This view is sometimes called "robust realism" or "normative non-naturalism", but I prefer "normative primitivism". For a defense of this view, see Enoch (2011). Sometimes quietists like Scanlon (2014) also describe themselves in the same camp, but I think this is a mistake; see Dasgupta (forthcoming) for further details.

being defined in terms of naturalness) that confers this normative significance on it. Fine, but since properties are cheap there will be another property P_q (of serving our quinterests, or being defined in terms of quaturalness) that stands to quuth just as P_L stands to L-truth. So, for L-truth to be normatively significant over quuth, P_L must already have normative significance over P_q too. If this fact is fundamental, we're done: we have a primitive, *sui generis* fact about normative significance. If instead you say that some further property P_L^* confers this significance on P_L , well, there'll be another property P_q^* that stands to P_q just as P_L^* stands to P_L ... and so on. Thus, if L-truth is to have normative significance over quuth, *either* at some point in the chain some property $P_L^{*...}$ must have normative significance all on its own, not in virtue of anything else, *or* the chain of properties each of which is normatively significant in virtue of the next must go on forever. Either way, the property of *being normatively significant* is not reducible to something else. It is an extra, *sui generis* component of reality over and above the natural (and super-natural) world order.

This *sui generis* property must be inherently *normative*, notice. As a comparison, Boghossian (1989) argued that the lesson of Kripkenstein's puzzle of how to go on is primitivism about *content*, the view that *meaning p* or *having the content q* is a primitive, irreducible property. As he put it, we must reject 'the reducibility of content properties to naturalistic properties' (p. 540). But primitive content properties *as such* don't help—at least, not if they're not inherently normative. For in that case all we have now is *another* property of '+', its "content", and it doesn't follow that *that property* determines the correct way to go on any more than its L-referent did. What *would* help is primitive normativity, a *sui generis* fact to the effect that primitive content properties are normatively significant. But then the primitive normativity could attach to some naturalistic mix of use plus world that was there anyway and the primitive contents are redundant.¹⁷

That is why realism implies normative primitivism, the view that normativity is its own, *sui generis* component of reality. Anyone who rejects primitive normativity, therefore, must embrace anti-realism. This includes normative naturalists, who reduce normativity to facts about the natural cosmos; constructivists, who reduce normativity to human natures or preferences; relativists, for whom normative requirements vary from culture to culture depending on the codes they accept; non-cognitivists, for whom normative claims are in a sense not fact-stating in the first place; and so on... what I've argued is that philosophers of these persuasions are *already* committed to anti-realism! This goes, of course, for any would-be *truther* who, like David Lewis, explicitly rejects primitive normativity—they too are already committed to anti-realism.

I will now argue that anti-realism leads to the pragmatist conceptions of inquiry, truth, justification, and meaning we started with. That is why I said at the beginning that my path to pragmatism proceeds from a claim that many would-be truthers already accept.

4. Pragmatism I: Truth

We have already seen that anti-realism implies the pragmatist conception of truth, so let us start there. To repeat, the argument was that whatever we mean by 'true', it must be a standard of

¹⁷ Perhaps by primitive content Boghossian meant what I mean by primitive normativity. If so, fine. The important point is that primitive content without primitive normativity does not, on its own, settle how to go on.

correct assertion *per* (CT). But according to anti-realism, this cannot be anything over and above *correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices*, for that is all the correctness there is to be had. Hence,

Pragmatist conception of truth:

Truth is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices.

But what *is* meant by ‘true’, exactly? More pertinently: what could an *anti-realist* mean by ‘true’, consistent with this pragmatist conception? Well, if truth does not transcend our epistemic practices, the obvious thought is that it must be defined in terms of them—in terms of long run or ideal justifiability, or something of that ilk. One sees this in pragmatists such as Peirce, who said that ‘the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth’ (Peirce 1955b, p. 39); and more recently in Putnam, who said that truth is ‘some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability’ (1981, p. 49). On both views, whatever rational inquiry converges on in certain (long run or idealized) conditions is *guaranteed* to be true! More generally, I will count as “epistemic” any theory of truth on which the possession of some epistemic status, such as long run or ideal justifiability, is necessary and sufficient for being true.

Does anti-realism imply that truth is epistemic in this sense? One might hope not. For one thing, epistemic theories strike many as ludicrous on the face of it. Truth is one thing and rational inquiry another, you might think, so there is *obviously* no guarantee that rational inquiry will converge on the truth—not even in ideal conditions. David Lewis was particularly incredulous, insisting without argument that Putnam’s theory is ‘out of the question’ (1984, p. 221). For another thing, Crispin Wright has argued that epistemic theories must reject classical logic in favor of “something of a broadly intuitionistic sort” (2001b, p. 766). For there will be, he argues, examples of a sentence S such that neither it nor its negation enjoy the relevant epistemic status; hence, if that status is necessary for truth, neither S nor its negation is true. Given the equivalence scheme,

‘S’ is true if and only if S

classical logic must go—an uncomfortable result!¹⁸

Fortunately, anti-realism does *not* imply an epistemic theory of truth. To the contrary, I’ll now argue, it implies that epistemic theories are *unintelligible* unless interpreted in a rather particular way. I will then show that anti-realism is in fact consistent with a variety of *non-epistemic* theories of truth, both inflationary (section 4.2) and deflationary (section 4.3). On these theories, truth is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices, *per* the pragmatist conception; yet nor is truth epistemic in the above sense. This might sound like a contradiction in terms, but I will show by construction that it is not. If that’s right, the upshot is that this core insight of the pragmatist tradition—that truth does not transcend our epistemic

¹⁸ Wright’s argument for this last claim is somewhat roundabout. To see the point, note that given the equivalence scheme it is classically provable that either S or its negation must be true. For either S or not-S (excluded middle); if S then ‘S’ is true, and if not-S then ‘not-S’ is true (equivalence scheme); either way, ‘S’ is true or ‘not-S’ is true (disjunction introduction); hence ‘S’ is true or ‘not-S’ is true (disjunction elimination).

practices—does not imply the kind of epistemic theory of truth that Wright and Lewis have railed against!

4.1. Epistemic truth

To begin, let me explain why anti-realism threatens to render epistemic theories unintelligible. Consider Putnam's theory as an example. Putnam said that truth is "some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability"; or as he put it elsewhere, "a true statement is one that could be justified were epistemic conditions ideal" (1990, p. vii). Now, Putnam thinks that justification is relative to an epistemic method (or standard, or rule). Examples of such methods include induction, modus ponens, trusting one's senses, and other familiar modes of reasoning; but they also include counter-induction, affirming the consequent, and other methods we reject. Thus,

All Fs observed so far are Gs

justifies

All Fs are Gs

relative to induction, but not relative to counter-induction. So, when Putnam says that "a true statement is one that could be justified were epistemic conditions ideal", this means: justified relative to certain methods. Which methods? *Ours*, the ones we *use* (or "adopt", as Putnam sometimes puts it). Or more accurately: the ones we use *now*, for Putnam thinks that our epistemic standards change over time to reflect our interests. And let's assume, with Putnam, that the methods themselves will determine what counts as an "epistemically ideal condition".¹⁹

The problem is with this supposition that there is a fact of the matter which methods are *ours*. You might think it's obvious: we use induction, of course, not counter-induction! But this is too fast. As well as induction there is *quinduction*, a method that agrees with induction in all cases we've encountered so far but diverges thereafter. By hypothesis, our inferential practices so far do not determine which method is *ours*; whether we infer by induction or quinduction. Don't say that induction is distinguished as our method thanks to being more natural, for quinduction (we can imagine) is equally distinguished thanks to being more quatural. And don't say, as Putnam might, that induction is distinguished as our method because it serves our *interests*, for quinduction (let's suppose) is equally distinguished thanks to serving our *quinterests*. The point should by now be familiar: there are *gallizations* of induction-like methods that fit our inferential practice so far but diverge thereafter, and for anti-realists there is no further fact as to which one is ours. *Every* such method is distinguished by *some* property or other, and anti-realists must maintain that all those properties are on a par. If not—if induction is distinguished as *our* method thanks to be more *natural*, or serving our *interests*—then we collapse into realism.

To see this, go back to the Quusters—the community just like us in their interests and quinterests, and who have reasoned just like us up to now, but who go on differently. When calculating '68+57', we infer that the answer is 125 while they infer that the answer is 5. Our

¹⁹ Along with the statement at hand, that is, for Putnam thinks that what counts as an ideal condition can vary depending on the subject matter and method.

inference conforms to modus ponens, let's suppose, but theirs conforms to *quodus ponens*—a method that agrees with modus ponens in all cases so far but diverges thereafter. By hypothesis, both methods fit our inferential practices so far equally well. So, if there were some further fact about us or the world that distinguished modus ponens over quodus ponens as *our* method—a fact in virtue of which reasoning by modus ponens is *correct*, given our shared interests and inferential history and so on—then that would break the symmetry between us and Questers. Which is, by definition, contrary to anti-realism.

The resulting realism is worth distinguishing from the realisms we discussed earlier. We might call it “constructive” (or “procedural”) realism—a realist view on which the normatively significant standard that determines the correct way to go on is not a *correspondence-like relation* such as L-reference, but certain *methods of reasoning*. Truth would then be what *those methods* converge on (in certain conditions), à la Peirce and Putnam; hence the “constructivism”. We can then distinguish full-blooded and anthropocentric varieties. Putnam's is anthropocentric: the distinguished methods are those that serve our *interests* (which can change over time). By contrast, a full-blooded variety would maintain that some methods are normatively significant in and of themselves, independently of us—I suspect this is more in line with Peirce's views, but I won't defend this historical point here.²⁰ Either way, the result is pragmatism of a realist bent: *pragmatism* insofar as truth is constrained epistemically, by long run or ideal justifiability; but *realism* insofar as there is a fact of the matter over and above our actual epistemic practices as to what justification amounts to, a fact that breaks the symmetry between us and the Questers. This is realism, as I conceive it, because it makes room for the idea that reasoning can “go wrong”, objectively speaking. Over and above our actual inferential practices, there is a further epistemic standard distinguished as normatively significant that we may or may not succeed in meeting.²¹

Anti-realism rejects any such further standard. There is no objective possibility of “going wrong” in reasoning, because there is no epistemic standard that's distinguished over the rest. There are just *our actual epistemic practices*—the sum total of the token assertions, inferential transitions, and so on, that we actually make both past, present, and future. For anti-realists, *that is all that our 'epistemic practices' can amount to*: the pragmatist conception of truth, as they see it, is that truth is nothing more than truth by the lights of *that*.

But in that case, Putnam's concept of truth as idealized justifiability breaks down. He said that “a true statement is one that could be justified were epistemic conditions ideal”, but there are two problems. For one thing, what counts as ‘ideal conditions’ was supposed to be determined by our epistemic standards, so if there is no fact of the matter which standards are *ours* then there is no fact of the matter which conditions are ideal either. But more importantly, even if we help ourselves to a particular epistemic condition C, Putnam's notion assumes that there is a fact of the matter as to what *would* (or *could*) be justified in C, by the lights of our epistemic methods,

²⁰ See Misak (1991), (2000, chapter 2), and (2013, chapter 3) for a reading and development of Peirce's views that strikes me as more full-blooded than anthropocentric.

²¹ I believe there is a deep divide within the pragmatist tradition between those who at root count as realists in the above sense and those who do not. It is hard to classify particular authors with much confidence, insofar as they may not have said much about the realism vs anti-realism distinction I have in mind. But Putnam and Peirce appear to be on the realist side (of the anthropocentric and full-blooded varieties, respectively). On the anti-realist side the most obvious candidate would be Richard Rorty, who characteristically eschews talk of standards or methods and anything of that ilk. But I mention this only in passing and leave it for other work to sort out historical figures.

and I don't see any way to evaluate this counterfactual if there is no fact of the matter as to what these methods are in the first place. For the anti-realist, there is just our actual epistemic practice—our *actual* token assertions and inferential transitions and so on—and *that's it*. In effect, Putnam is asking us to carry *that actual practice* over to a counterfactual situation (as it were) and ask what *it* would justify in those conditions, but this makes no sense.

The same goes for *any* account of truth in terms of justification in counterfactual (long run or ideal) conditions. Any such account would appear to presuppose a distinguished class of epistemic methods, over and above our actual epistemic practices, with which to evaluate the counterfactual, and it is precisely this presupposition that anti-realism rejects.

There is something anti-realists might salvage from this, however. For we do, as a matter of fact, have a practice of evaluating counterfactuals. We all agree that if I dropped this pen it would fall to the floor; that it wouldn't turn into a pumpkin on the way; and so forth. Likewise, we all agree that if I looked to see if grass is green in good conditions (lights on, eyes open), I would conclude that it is. These are rudimentary counterfactuals the acceptance of which is part of our actual epistemic practice. Furthermore, we do, as a matter of fact, use words like 'perception' and 'induction' to talk about our actual epistemic practices; hence the previous counterfactual could be re-phrased

(*) If I were to inquire whether grass is green by perception, I would conclude that it is.

Our acceptance of this counterfactual is also part of our actual epistemic practice. More generally, it is part of our actual epistemic practice to evaluate counterfactuals like

If one were to inquire whether S by perception (induction, modus ponens), one would conclude that S (that not-S / neither).

To evaluate counterfactuals like this is to inquire *about our practice of inquiry itself*—this is a “second-order” epistemic practice, as I'll call it, which we do, as a matter of fact, engage in. To *this* extent Putnam's counterfactuals like (*) are perfectly intelligible to anti-realists. But let's be clear what they *amount to*, on this reading: they hold (when they do) only *by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices*. That is, it's not that there is a fact of the matter as to which, out of all the perception-like methods in Plato's heaven consistent with our actual epistemic practice so far, is *ours*, such that it is then an objective fact about *that method* that it would yield certain conclusions in certain conditions. On this “external” reading, as I'll call it, such counterfactuals hold (when they do) *by the lights of reality*, independent of our second-order epistemic practices. They reflect objective facts about (i) which methods are ours, and (ii) what those methods would justify in certain conditions. That's the reading we assumed earlier, which is unintelligible to anti-realists. On the “internal” reading available to anti-realists, by contrast, they just reflect our actual (second-order) practice of evaluating counterfactuals in certain ways.

To illustrate crudely, imagine that our second-order epistemic practices differed but our first-order practices remained the same. When figuring out if grass is green we tend to open our eyes in good lighting conditions, but for whatever reason we reject the counterfactual (*). Then on the external reading, (*) would still obtain: it remains true of *our* first-order method of perception

that it would justify “grass is green” in certain conditions. But on the internal reading, it wouldn’t: (*) would no longer hold *by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices*. If we read Putnam’s theory of truth internally, therefore, the truth of ‘grass is green’ depends not so much on *the first-order method of perception* and what it would justify in ideal conditions, but on our second-order practice of accepting counterfactuals like (*).²²

Again, the same goes for any epistemic theory of truth in terms of justification in counterfactual (long-run or ideal) conditions. Read externally, anti-realists will reject the relevant counterfactuals as unintelligible, as we’ve seen. But they are intelligible to anti-realists on the internal reading, as holding (when they do) *by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices*.

But if anti-realists must interpret *epistemic* theories of truth internally, why can’t they interpret *non-epistemic* theories likewise? No reason! Thus they might read a *correspondence* theory of truth, for example, as something that holds (if it does) *just by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices* and not in any further, objective (or “external”) sense. The result, I’ll now show, would be a *non-epistemic* theory of truth; yet one that remains faithful to the pragmatist conception of truth as nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices. To show this, I’ll discuss inflationary theories of truth first (section 4.2) and then turn to deflationary theories (section 4.3).

4.2. Inflationary truth

The key is to see that our second-order epistemic practice (of inquiring about inquiry itself) includes more than evaluating counterfactuals like (*). It also includes more general questions about our epistemic practices such as what kinds of assertions we typically make, what they all have in common, and so forth. Now suppose, just as an example, that when we look into this we find that our epistemic practices “revolve around” the Lewisian property of L-truth. I will remain deliberately vague about “revolving around” means, for reasons that will emerge. But the rough idea is that when inquiring into a subject matter we appear to be sensitive to what’s L-true. We tend (in certain conditions, at least) to end up asserting sentences that are L-true and rejecting sentences that aren’t, evaluating the former sentences *as correct* and the latter *as incorrect*. Our epistemic practices appear, that is, to *treat* L-truth as the standard of correctness. If so, it might behoove us to appeal to this property of L-truth in an explanatory theory of inquiry. We might find it explanatorily fruitful, for example, to *describe* and *categorize* our assertions by way of this property, in terms of their conditions of being L-true. That is to say, our best theory of inquiry might state *that L-truth is the standard of correctness* (for us, given our epistemic practices).

Three clarifications are important. First, remember that, for anti-realists, the “practice of inquiry” under investigation consists just in *our actual assertions and inferential transitions* and so forth. We’re imagining that these appear to revolve around L-truth, but since L-truth and quuth coincide “around here” and diverge only in unexamined cases, one could equally say that

²² Putnam said he was offering realism “with a human face”, and that’s accurate on the external reading insofar as truth (on his theory) depends on *our* epistemic standards, which in turn depend on *our* interests. But on the internal reading, truth has a human face twice over. It’s not just that truth depends on our first-order epistemic practices (e.g., of inquiring about grass); it depends also on our second-order practice of evaluating counterfactuals about inquiry.

they revolve around quuth. What then justifies the focus on L-truth over quuth in our theory of inquiry? Nothing, objectively speaking. The idea is just that *our second-order practice of inquiring about inquiry* treats L-truth, not quuth, as projectible and explanatory. For anti-realists, this is an empirical fact about *us*, if you like, not an objective fact about the causal-explanatory structure of reality or the normative significance of L-truth. Thus, the idea is not that the best theory of inquiry *by the lights of reality* affords L-truth a central explanatory role, but that the best theory *by the lights of our second-order practices* does.

Second, this is why I am deliberately vague about what it means for our epistemic practices to “revolve around” L-truth. For different *second-order* practices will find different precisifications more illuminating than others, and anti-realists should regard all precisifications as objectively speaking on a par. Thus, what I’m asking us to suppose is that our epistemic practices “revolve around” L-truth *in some sense that our second-order epistemic practices find illuminating*.

Third, L-truth is just an example. It is defined in terms of the relation of L-reference, fixed by use plus naturalness, but the same goes for *any* of the inflationist theories mentioned at the end of section 2 on which truth is defined in terms of some mixture of use plus world involving causation, or teleological functions, or what have you. What I’m asking us to suppose, then, is that our epistemic practices revolve around *some such* property—call it $truth_i$ —in *some sense* of “revolve around” that our second-order epistemic practices find illuminating. With two free parameters to tweak, this supposition is fairly weak (I will return to just how weak it is).

Suppose this is so. Then our best theory of inquiry will state *that $truth_i$ is the standard of correctness*. Given the platitude

(CT) An assertion of a sentence ‘S’ is correct if and only if ‘S’ is true,

this theory implies *that $truth = truth_i$* .

Now, I want to show two things about this theory of truth: it is not an epistemic theory, yet it verifies the pragmatist conception of truth as nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices. The first is clear. For the theory identifies truth with $truth_i$, which is (by construction) a property defined in non-epistemic terms such as naturalness, causation, or what have you. There is therefore no reason to expect that the possession of some epistemic status is necessary or sufficient for being true. Indeed, $truth_i$ could turn out to be L-truth, and we know there are no epistemic necessary or sufficient conditions for *that*.

At the same time, truth is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices, *per* the pragmatist conception. For whatever (non-epistemic) property $truth_i$ turns out to be, it plays this role as our standard of correctness only because our epistemic practices revolve around it (by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices). Our epistemic practices come first, as it were: they are what they are, and then $truth_i$ is whatever *they* revolve around (by our lights). In that sense, truth is *whatever counts as truth* by the lights of our epistemic practices. To illustrate the point, note that the symmetry between us and the Quusters remains unbroken. Suppose we go on to revolve around L-truth (by the lights of our second-order

practices), and in virtue of that L-truth plays the role as *our* standard of correctness and is what *we* call ‘truth’. And suppose the Questers go on to revolve around quuth (by the lights of *their* second-order practices), and in virtue of that quuth plays the role as *their* standard of correctness and is what *they* call ‘truth’. On the current view, there is no further fact that breaks the symmetry between us and them; there is no *objective* standard of correctness, that is, over and above correctness by the lights of these or those epistemic practices. That was the corner-stone of anti-realism from which the pragmatic conception of truth followed, and the current theory of truth does not depart from this.

We thereby verify the pragmatist conception of truth as nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices. But we do so not with an *analysis* or *definition* of truth in epistemic terms—that’s what epistemic theories offered, and that’s not what we have here. Again, truth = *truth_i*, which is (by construction) a property defined in non-epistemic terms (such as naturalness or causation). Rather, we verify the pragmatist conception with a claim about *why* truth_i plays this role as our standard of correctness, i.e. because our epistemic practices revolve around it. This is to understand the pragmatist conception of truth at the level of *meta-meta-semantic*s—as a theory about why truth_i matters.

So understood, the pragmatist conception is consistent with so-called “correspondence theories” on which a sentence is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact! For relations are cheap: there is correspondence and quorrespondence, so a sentence may correspond to one fact and quorrespond to another at the very same time. The pragmatist conception is then a theory about why one relation matters, why it deserves the title ‘truth’. I said at the beginning that pragmatists reject the correspondence theory, but perhaps that was too quick. What *my* reading of the pragmatist conception rejects is not necessarily that truth is correspondence, but that correspondence has any normative significance over other word-world relations. This may have been William James’ point when he complained of the correspondence theory that “it is not self-evident that the sole business of our mind with realities should be to copy them” (1904, p. 467). As I like to read him, his point is not that correspondence (or copying) is objectionably obscure, though that is one complaint often levied against it. It’s rather that correspondence has no normative significance.²³

James himself is associated with the idea that truth is “what works” in a practical sense, and the current approach is also consistent with a theory of truth along these lines. After all, we’re identifying truth with *whatever standard our epistemic practices revolve around* (by our lights). If our epistemic practices tend to serve practical purposes, this may turn out to be a *practical* standard—for example, of promoting our interests, or leading to success in action, or something of that ilk. Of course, for anti-realists it’s not that interests (or success) have any objective normative significance over quinterests (or quuccess)—that would be realism, as we saw in section 3. Rather, it’s just that our epistemic practices happen to revolve (by our lights) around a standard that we happen to describe in those terms.

Either way, the pragmatist conception of truth—understood in this way as meta-meta-semantic—is consistent with much of what truthers say about the possibility of inquiry and truth coming apart. Admittedly, they cannot diverge *too* dramatically, for truth is whatever satisfies

²³ Kitcher (2012) also argues that James doesn’t really oppose the correspondence theory.

the description “the standard that our epistemic practices revolve around”; hence on any reasonable interpretation of “revolves around” it cannot be that inquiry *always and systematically* diverges from the truth. Truth will inevitably be something our epistemic practices “track” in *some* sense of the term—a point to which I shall return in section 5. But beyond that, there is no implication that inquiry will converge on the truth. Even in the long run, inquiry could end up diverging from the truth. For example, imagine humanity going extinct due to atmospheric collapse, with the final year of inquiry conducted in a state of hypoxia.²⁴ In that case, the standard that our epistemic practices *for the most part* revolve around might be one that we diverge from in the final year. Nor does it follow that truth is what we *would* converge on in idealized conditions—not even when this counterfactual is understood internally. Again, on the current view truth could turn out to be L-truth, and it is perfectly coherent to think that there are L-truths we could never verify. The point is that while truth is whatever standard satisfies an epistemic description, namely “the standard our epistemic practices revolve around”, once we rigidify on that description the resulting standard need not have a necessary or counterfactual connection to our epistemic practices.

I said in section 3 that, according to anti-realism, there is no *objective* possibility of going on incorrectly. I’ve now sketched an anti-realist theory of truth on which we may go on to say things that count as false. Contradiction? No, because to say something false is not, on this view, to say something that is *objectively* incorrect; it’s just to say something that’s incorrect *by the lights of our epistemic practices*. What we’re seeing is that those practices may include practices of self-evaluation, criticism, and regulation, such that what counts as the standard of correctness *by the lights of our practices* is a standard we do not always meet.

For anti-realists, an inflationary theory of truth along these lines followed from one assumption: that there is *some* property, call it truth_i, that our epistemic practices revolve around, in *some* sense of “revolve around” that our second-order epistemic practices find illuminating. I said that the assumption is fairly weak given the two free parameters, but just how weak is it? It presupposes that *all* our epistemic practices revolve around *the same* standard, and one might find that a stretch. It could be that mathematical, ethical, and scientific discourses serve different purposes and function in different ways, so that our scientific practices revolve around one standard, our mathematical practices another, and so on. Indeed, this plurality of discourses is a point emphasized by contemporary pragmatists such as Misak (2009) and Price (2011), and *anti-realists* are hardly in a position to rule it out given their view that the standards they revolve around are all on a par. But in that case, just take the disjunction of such standards S: our epistemic practices (writ large) then revolve around *that* standard S by construction.²⁵ You might then worry that S couldn’t be illuminating in the relevant sense, on the grounds that disjunctive properties in general aren’t explanatory. But this worry is confused, for according to anti-realism there is no real distinction between disjunctive and non-disjunctive standards in the first place. All standards are metaphysically speaking on a par; a standard is disjunctive only relative to a given vocabulary. Thus, to describe S *as disjunctive* is to just say that it is disjunctive relative to a certain vocabulary—physics, perhaps. It’s to say that *by the lights of physics* (say) there is

²⁴ Thanks to Veronica Gomez-Sanchez for this example.

²⁵ Equivalently, one could identify *mathematical truth* with one standard, *scientific truth* with another, and then let *truth* be the disjunction of these truth properties. But that is just a verbal variation on the point in the text.

nothing in common between the disjuncts. But that is consistent with their being a unified kind *by the lights of our theory of inquiry*.

I conclude that the relevant assumption is indeed fairly weak. Still, for those anti-realists unwilling to make it, let me sketch another non-epistemic theory of truth that does not require it—a deflationary theory.

4.3. Deflationary truth

The theory I'll sketch is based on Hartry Field's deflationism about meaning and truth set out in Field (1994) and (2001).²⁶ Start with his notion of pure disquotational truth. To say that a sentence 'S' is disquotationally true, or true_d for short, is just to say that S; the two statements are cognitively equivalent. Thus, all instances of the equivalence scheme

'S' is true_d if and only if S

hold of 'conceptual necessity', as Field (1994) puts it. This is a "deflationary" notion of truth insofar as we have not identified a property shared by all true_d sentences, in virtue of which they all count as true_d . For 'grass is green' to be true_d *just is* for grass to be green, for 'snow is white' to be true_d *just is* for snow to be white, and so on. Rather, ' true_d ' is just a device of semantic assent. Regardless of whether the English word 'true' is disquotational in this sense, there is nothing to stop anti-realists introducing ' true_d ' for its well-known expressive utility.²⁷

How does truth_d relate to correct assertion? Recall our platitude

(CT) An assertion of a sentence 'S' is correct if and only if 'S' is true.

For inflationists, this was a constraint on an adequate theory of truth: whatever truth is, it must serve as a standard of correct assertion. But for deflationists, in Field's sense, truth plays no role in a theory of meaning or correctness-conditions. On their view, the platitude consists at root in all instances of the *scheme*

(CS) An assertion of 'S' is correct if and only if S.

An assertion of 'snow is white' is correct if and only if snow is white; an assertion of 'grass is green' is correct if and only if grass is green; and so on. But with disquotational truth_d , each instance is cognitively equivalent to

An assertion of 'S' is correct if and only if 'S' is true_d .

²⁶ It is Field's deflationism; the only caveat is that at some points I will make choices that he preferred to leave open. So I don't know if he would assent to everything I'm about to say, even though it is all drawn from his framework.

²⁷ To take the classic example, suppose you want to express agreement with what Smith said last night but can't remember what she said. Then instead of saying "Either Smith said 'Snow is white' and snow is white, or Smith said 'Grass is green' and grass is green, or...", disquotational truth_d allows you to say "Smith said something true_d ." Some deflationists argue that this is the only utility of truth and argue on that basis that true_d is the English 'true'; see for example Horwich (1995).

and the platitudinous scheme is then readily expressed thus:

(CT_d) An assertion of a sentence ‘S’ is correct if and only if ‘S’ is true_d.

We might then call truth_d a ‘standard of correct assertion’, so long as we remember that this is just a *façon de parler*. In reality, there is no property that all true_d sentences share, in virtue of which assertions of them are correct.

As before, I want to show two things about truth_d: it is not epistemic; yet, for anti-realists it is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices, *per* the pragmatist conception.

The first is clear. There are obviously no *epistemic* necessary or sufficient conditions for being true_d, simply because there are no necessary or sufficient conditions for being true_d *at all!* There is no property shared by all true_d sentences, remember, in virtue of which they count as true_d. Nor does each sentence have its own epistemic conditions for being true_d: for ‘electrons have mass’ to be true_d *just is* for electrons to have mass, and (for all we’ve said) there are no epistemic necessary or sufficient conditions for *that*.

There is therefore no implication that inquiry will converge on the truth_d—not even in the long run or ideal conditions. To illustrate, consider the sentence

(1) The number of brontosauruses that ever existed is even.

And let’s assume excluded middle for this sentence:

(2) Either the number of brontosauruses that ever existed is even, or the number of brontosauruses that ever existed is not even.

By assuming excluded middle, I don’t mean to assume that (2) “corresponds to a fact” or anything of that ilk. I mean to suppose, rather, that it is *part of our actual inferential practice* to reason classically with (1). Nothing in anti-realism rules out such a practice. Likewise, when evaluating questions about inquiry and verification, nothing in anti-realism rules out a (second-order) epistemic practice in which we conclude that we could never verify whether the number of brontosauruses ever existed is even, not even in ideal conditions. That is to say, it may well be part of our epistemic practice to assert

(3) Either the number of brontosauruses that ever existed is even, or the number of brontosauruses that ever existed is not even, but we could never verify which (not even in ideal conditions).

But (3) is cognitively equivalent to

(4) Either ‘The number of brontosauruses that ever existed is even’ is true_d, or ‘The number of brontosauruses that ever existed is not even’ is true_d, but we could never verify which (not even in ideal conditions).

That is, there are truths_d we could never come to verify—not even in ideal conditions.

So truth_d is not epistemic. At the same time, truth_d is nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices, *per* the pragmatist conception. Remember, the core idea behind the pragmatist conception was that there is no objective standard of correctness by which to break the symmetry between us and the Quusters, there is just correctness by the lights of these or those epistemic practices. So the claim is that for anti-realists, truth_d is not an objective standard of correctness in this sense.

This may not be obvious. Remember, we showed that

(CT_d) An assertion of a ‘S’ is correct if and only if ‘S’ is true_d.

This implies that my assertion of ‘snow is white’ is correct if and only if ‘snow is white’ is true_d; that is, if and only if *snow is white*. But isn’t it *objective* whether snow is white? If so, isn’t this an objective standard of correct assertion? Yes, in one sense of objective. But not the relevant sense: it does not break the symmetry between us and the Quusters.

To see why, we must look closer at Field’s notion of truth_d and the deflationary theory of meaning he pairs it with. Remember that to assert

‘S’ is true_d

just is to assert

S

But I can’t *assert* a sentence of French because I don’t speak that language. I can only assert sentences I *understand*. Thus, I can only apply ‘true_d’ to sentences in my own language—or, as Field says, my own *idiolect*. And what is an idiolect? For Field, my idiolect is my *current* understanding of language, which in turn consists in the computational role that each expression *currently* plays for me. Field therefore carves idiolects very finely indeed: it is the idiolect *of a person, at a time*.

How then is communication possible? By translating between idiolects. Crucially, translation is *not* a matter of pairing expressions with the same *referent*, or sentences with the same *truth-conditions*. More generally, Field rejects the idea that there are extra-linguistic entities, *meanings*, that expressions have, such that a good translation pairs expressions with the same meanings. Rather, what makes for good translation depends on the purposes at hand. Suppose I want my British friend to give me a cookie. What should I say? I look for a word she typically associates with cookies and causes her to hand over cookies, such as ‘biscuit’. This is a good translation of ‘cookie’ not because it reflects some prior fact about “the meaning” of each term, but because it gets me a cookie.

In fact, Field says little about how “good” translation is supposed to work or what the relevant “purposes at hand” might be. In the example I just gave the purpose is distinctively practical, in other cases it may be less so. Either way, note that translation is an *epistemic practice*: one takes information about each expression and infers that one is well translated as the other. Thus, for anti-realists a good translation is good *by the lights of our epistemic practices*. There is no further fact as to whether it is *really* good—not even relative to a given purpose. Realists who adopt Field’s theory will maintain that there is such a further fact, but the point I wish to emphasize is that for anti-realists there is no such thing.

Either way, Field’s idea is that translation then grounds attributions of meaning across idiolects. To say that ‘neige’ means snow, for example, is to say that ‘neige’ is well translated as ‘snow’ in one’s own idiolect. Likewise, to say that ‘Neige est blanc’ means that snow is white is to say that ‘Neige est blanc’ is well translated as ‘Snow is white’ is one’s idiolect.

Translation also provides a means of attributing truth_d , in a derivate manner, to sentences in other idiolects. If I don’t speak French, I can’t literally assert that ‘Neige est blanc’ is true_d ; but I *can* assert that it is well translated into a sentence of mine, ‘Snow is white’, which is true_d . This is (ignoring some details) Field’s notion of quasi-disquotational truth: to say that a sentence ‘S’ is quasi-disquotationally true, or ‘ true_{qd} ’ for short, *just is* to say that ‘S’ translates well into a sentence of one’s own idiolect that is true_d .

We are now in a position to see why, for anti-realists, truth_d is not an *objective* standard that breaks the symmetry between us and the Quusters. When I derived

(CT_d) An assertion of a sentence ‘S’ is correct if and only if ‘S’ is true_d ,

notice that (CT_d) in my mouth ranges only over sentences *in my own idiolect*. A Quuster may derive “the same” principle (CT_d); but in her mouth (CT_d) ranges only over sentences *in her idiolect*. So none of this breaks the symmetry between us. When the Quuster goes on to assert “ $68+57=5$ ”, this does not violate constraint (CT_d) on correct assertion—at least, not *my* constraint, the one I express in my mouth, since that only ranges over sentences in *my* idiolect! I cannot infer from (CT_d) that she said something *incorrect*. Likewise in reverse: when I go on to assert “ $68+57=125$ ”, this does not violate constraint (CT_d) on correct assertion in the Quuster’s mouth—she cannot infer from (CT_d) that *I* said anything incorrect either!

To be sure, I may wish to evaluate the Quuster negatively, as saying something *incorrect*. And what this amounts to, on Field’s view, is this: that I take her ‘+’ to be well translated into my ‘+’; hence I translate ‘ $68+57=5$ ’ in her idiolect as ‘ $68+57=5$ ’ in mine; and since *my inferential practice* is to reject that sentence and assert its negation, I can say that her sentence is not true_{qd} . Thus, her assertion violates a strengthened principle of correct assertion I can express in terms of quasi-disquotational truth_{qd} :

(CT_{qd}) An assertion of a sentence ‘S’ is correct if and only if ‘S’ is true_{qd} .

This principle ranges over sentences in both our idiolects, so I can infer from it that the Quuster said something incorrect. But exactly the same goes in reverse! If the Quuster takes my sentence

'68+57=125' to be well translated into her sentence '68+57=125', then since *her inferential practice* is to reject that sentence and assert its negation, she will say that my sentence is not true_{qd}; and hence, by (CT_{qd}), that I said something incorrect too. Thus we can both *with equal legitimacy* accuse the other of saying something incorrect!

The point here is that while (CT_{qd}) ranges over sentences in both our idiolects, what it *amounts to*—which assertions it counts as *incorrect*—depends on who's perspective one takes. This is because 'true_{qd}' is still indexed to the person applying the predicate: its application depends on their epistemic practices of translation, as well as their general inferential practices (in this case involving mathematics). There is no absolute fact of the matter whether a given sentence 'S' is true_{qd}, as it were; it depends on the epistemic practices of the person assessing 'S' for truth_{qd}. Thus, I will insist that I speak truly_{qd} and the Quuster does not; but she will *with equal legitimacy* insist that *she* speaks truly_{qd} and I do not! According to anti-realism that is all there is to say—here remains the perfect symmetry between us.

That is why truth_d, and by extension truth_{qd}, are not objective standards of correctness by which to break the symmetry between us and the Quusters. In that sense truth_d and truth_{qd} do not transcend our epistemic practices, just as the pragmatist conception maintains. This is so even though they are both non-epistemic notions, as explained above.

5. Pragmatism II: Justification

I've argued that anti-realism implies the pragmatist conception of truth as nothing over and above truth by the lights of our epistemic practices. I've also shown that this is compatible with a number of *non-epistemic* theories of truth, both inflationary and deflationary.

The other pragmatist views about inquiry, justification, and meaning now follow thick and fast. Start with the question of justification. What justifies our methods of inquiry such as induction and modus ponens? Of course, for anti-realists that's not quite the right way to put the question since our epistemic practices don't fix whether we use induction or quinduction in the first place. The question is really what justifies *our actual practices*, the particular inferential transitions we actually make, past, present, and future. But for brevity I'll continue to describe these as 'our method of induction' and so on (after all, we do, as a matter of fact, use words like 'induction' to talk about our epistemic practices; see section 4.1).

So, what justifies these methods? In virtue of what are they the right way to reason? For truthers, a core factor is that they track truth. Putting aside exactly what 'tracking' means and whether other factors are also involved, the basic picture is clear enough: modus ponens is justified because it is necessarily truth-preserving, induction is justified because its predictions tend to be true, and so on. By contrast, pragmatists see justification as having more to do with *us*. As I put it,

Pragmatist conception of justification:

Our methods of inquiry are justified, if at all, in terms of our practices.

I claim that this follows from anti-realism. To see why, consider first what realism implies about justification. On that view, one standard is normatively significant over the rest. An assertion (or belief) that doesn't meet that standard is then incorrect—not just incorrect by the lights of our practices, but objectively so. A method will therefore earn its keep only insofar as it tracks *that* standard. This clearly vindicates the truther's picture over the pragmatist's. It also paves the road to radical skepticism. For there is no guarantee that our parochial methods track that privileged standard, and if we try to argue that they do we'll inevitably use *our* methods—the very methods we're trying to justify.

According to anti-realism, by contrast, there is no objective standard of correctness over and above correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices. It follows that there is no Archimedean point from which to evaluate our methods; no privileged standard such that our methods earn their keep only insofar as they track *it*. At bottom they are simply the methods we use; they earn their keep thanks to being *ours*. We can of course evaluate our methods “internally”, asking how one fares by the lights of another. We might ask whether a new statistical technique does well by the lights of an older one, for example. All this is non-trivial—enough to keep the epistemologists busy. The issue is what we're doing when we do this: what we're *not* doing is evaluating these methods “externally”, asking how they fare by the lights of an objectively distinguished standard of correctness, for according to anti-realism there is no such thing. We are, rather, asking how one practice fares by the lights of another. This is the pragmatist conception of justification.

Of course, anti-realists who take the inflationary route of section 4.2 claim that truth = *truth_i*, i.e., the standard our epistemic practices revolve around (by the lights of our second-order practices). It follows that our methods will inevitably “track” truth in *some* sense of the term. Radical skepticism therefore doesn't get off the ground: there is no question whether our methods track truth, they are *guaranteed* to because truth *just is* whatever standard they track! The rejection of radical skepticism is a hallmark of the pragmatist tradition from Pierce to Rorty, and the conception of justification we have here joins them in this regard.

This pragmatist conception of justification has a relativist flavor: induction is justified *for us* but not for a community of counter-inducers. A common objection to relativism is that its proponents are in no position to offer *reasons* in support of their view. For if they present something that counts as a reason by the lights of their methods, their own view implies that those methods are justified only *for them*. Why then should their opponents care? But this objection ignores the fact that both parties might use the same methods. If an anti-realist argues for her view by modus ponens, for example, it would be a strange realist indeed who doesn't recognize it as an *argument*! Some realists might claim not to care for modus ponens, and debate with *that* opponent might well be impossible. But that just reflects the mundane fact that debate presupposes some common ground, if only in method.²⁸

Still, some may find this relativism disturbing. If events in 1942 had unfolded differently, the “scientific method” would now include Nazi medicine. Those suffering under the regime would

²⁸ Boghossian (2006, chapter 6) makes this point, though he objects to relativism on other grounds. But his objection assumes that our epistemic methods are general principles or rules that have implications in potentially infinite cases. As the discussion of induction and quinduction illustrates, anti-realists reject this assumption.

then *say* that Nazi medicine is justified, and they'd be right. One naturally wishes for some privileged standard on the basis of which they could criticize their scientists, but according to anti-realism there is none. *We* can say that their methods are unjustified and don't lead to truth_i, but we can say that only because our methods are not theirs—those living under Nazi rule would have no such privilege. Their resistance must therefore be based not on arguments about truth_i or justification, but on the strength of their personal convictions. Far from disturbing, I find this inspiring. Their liberation—if it comes—will be genuinely *theirs*, a system of practices they created for the betterment of humanity (by their lights). To my mind that is a far greater achievement than the mere copying of some external standard. As Rorty put it, what pragmatists hope for “is not that the future will conform to a plan... but rather that the future will astonish and exhilarate” (1999, p. 28).

6. Pragmatism III: Inquiry

Turn now to the nature of inquiry. I said at the beginning that while truthers think inquiry aims at truth, pragmatists think its “aim” (if there is such a thing) has to do with *us*. As I put it:

Pragmatist conception of inquiry:

The aim of inquiry (insofar as there is such a thing) is internal to our interests and practices.

Now, this talk of “aim” bears clarification. When truthers say that inquiry aims at truth, this could mean (i) that the goal is to accumulate true theories and avoid false ones, or (ii) that truth is the standard by which a theory is to be evaluated as correct or incorrect.²⁹ The first claim is most implausible, for many truths are worthless: it would be a waste of time to discover exactly how many blades of grass exist. Human interests obviously influence *which* truths to accumulate, and indeed whether to accumulate *truths* in the first place (false theories can have great utility, after all).³⁰ Instead, the truther I have in mind makes the second claim: that truth is the standard by which to evaluate a theory as correct or incorrect—or more accurately, the standard by which to evaluate an *assertion* of the theory (or a *belief* in it, or *acceptance* of it, or what have you).

The pragmatist conception of inquiry should therefore be read as a corresponding claim about the standard of correctness too: that it involves our interests or practices. Thus, William James said that a theory is ‘an instrument: it is designed to achieve a purpose’ (1975, p. 33); hence it is to be evaluated primarily according to whether it works. And Charles Peirce (1955a) said that inquiry is a process that replaces doubt with “settled belief”, which is worth doing because doubt paralyzes action. So on his view the function of belief is to facilitate action; hence they should be evaluated as to whether they do so successfully.

Anti-realism clearly implies a conception of inquiry along these lines. According to anti-realism, there is no objective standard of correctness over and above correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices. So, if talk about “the aim” of inquiry just means “the standard of correctness”, it follows that inquiry has no aim over and above correctness *by the lights of our epistemic practices*. In that sense the aim of inquiry is internal to our epistemic practices.

²⁹ These correspond to what Lynch (2009) calls the “goal of inquiry” and the “norm of belief”, respectively.

³⁰ See Kitcher (2011, p. 105-111) for more on these points.

To be sure, anti-realists who take the inflationary route of section 4.2 will say that the standard of correctness is truth_i —a non-epistemic standard such as Lewisian L-truth. It follows that truth_i is the “aim of inquiry”, and isn’t this antithetical to the pragmatist conception? No, for the question is *why* truth_i , not (say) quuth, plays this role. For anti-realists, it does so only because our epistemic practices “revolve around” it (by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices). In that sense it’s still our epistemic practices that pull the strings in determining the aim of inquiry. This is the pragmatist conception of inquiry *when read as a claim of meta-meta-semantics*. So interpreted, the claim is not that the standard at which inquiry aims is defined or analyzed in epistemic or practical terms—again, it could be the Lewisian standard of L-truth. Rather, it’s a claim about *why* that’s the aim, i.e. because of our epistemic practices.

Moreover, if our epistemic practices serve a practical purpose, then—as we saw in section 4.2— truth_i may turn out to be a practical standard, e.g. of leading to success in action. If so, the above quotes from James and Pierce would be verified in a more literal sense: the standard at which inquiry aims would itself be inherently practical.

Either way, the aim of inquiry is internal to our practices *per* the pragmatist conception. This is an “aim” only in the thinnest of senses, however. It’s not a “teleological” aim in the sense of an end or destination fixed from the start. That is, it’s not that the standard of truth has a distinguished status prior to (or independently of) our engaging in inquiry, such that the fruits of inquiry can then be evaluated as correct or incorrect depending on whether they meet *it*. Rather, truth is the “aim” only in the non-teleological sense that it’s what our practice of inquiry happens to revolve around (by our lights). Thus, what truthers must have in mind—insofar as they are not pragmatists in disguise—is that truth is a *teleological* aim. And that is precisely what you get from realism. On that view, there is an objective standard of correctness over and above correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices, which, by (CT), is what counts as *truth*. That sets the aim of inquiry *now*, prior to our going on one way or another. When truthers say that inquiry aims at truth, they must mean that it aims at *that*.

7. Pragmatism IV: Meaning

Turn finally to the nature of meaning. I said at the beginning that while truthers think that meaning consists in truth-conditions and reference and the like, pragmatists focus more on how language is actually used in practice. As I put it,

Pragmatist conception of meaning:

Meaning is nothing over and above actual linguistic practice.

You might find it odd that I have left this to the end, for meaning was key to the early pragmatists. Peirce said that ‘there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference in practice’ (1955b, p. 30). Likewise, James wrote that ‘if no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle’ (James 1975, p. 28). So central was this to their philosophy that it is dubbed the “pragmatist maxim” and often considered the source of their other pragmatist views.

But in fact, I have not left meaning to end. For anti-realism *is* the pragmatist conception of meaning! Remember, I said in section 1 that by ‘meaning’ I mean only that expressions like ‘+’ have conditions of correct application. But according to anti-realism, there is no objective standard of correctness over and above correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices. So the meaning of ‘+’ can be nothing over and above what counts as correct application *by the lights of our epistemic practices*. And our epistemic practice is nothing over and above the sum total of our token assertions, inferential transitions, and so on. That is, meaning is nothing over and above how words are actually used in practice. Now, it might be a stretch to say that this is what Peirce and James had in mind by their pragmatist maxim. Still, like them I have derived pragmatist views on other topics from this core thesis about meaning.

Of course, if you expect meaning to determine an *objectively correct* way to go on—something that breaks the symmetry between us and the Quusters—then what anti-realism implies is that *there is no such thing as meaning*. But that’s an odd way to talk, insofar as we manifestly engage in the practice of *attributing* meaning. What could this practice amount to? For anti-realists who take the deflationary route of section 4.3, it amounts to translation: to say that ‘S’ means that p, remember, is to say that ‘S’ is well translated into one’s own idiolect as ‘p’ (by the lights of one’s epistemic practice of translation). Anti-realists who take the inflationary route of section 4.2, by contrast, maintain that truth_i is the standard of correctness, so it follows on their view that the meaning (i.e., correctness-condition) of a sentence is its truth_i-condition. This might sound antithetical to the pragmatist conception of meaning, but it’s not. Again, the question is *why* truth_i, not (say) quuth, plays this role as our standard of correctness. For anti-realists, it’s just because our epistemic practices revolve around it (by our lights). A sentence has myriad properties—a truth_i-condition, a quuth-condition, etc.—and the one that constitutes is *meaning*, on this view, is whichever one we revolve around *by the lights of our second-order epistemic practices*. This is the pragmatist conception of meaning *when read as a claim of meta-meta-semantics*: it’s our epistemic practices that determines which property counts as meaning.

Thus, when truthers said that meaning consists in truth-conditions (and reference and the like), what they must mean—insofar as they are not closet pragmatists—is that truth-conditions (not quuth-conditions) count as meanings independently of our epistemic practices. And that is precisely what realism implies. On that view, there is an objective standard of correctness over and above correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices—the standard with normative significance. By our platitude (CT), that standard is what counts as truth; hence the meaning of a sentence is its conditions of meeting *that*.

8. Transcendental pragmatism

This then is the normative path to pragmatism. It starts with the claim that nothing has the normative status of determining an objectively correct way to go on (nothing is “normatively significant”). There is no objective standard of correctness, that is, over and above *what we treat as correct*—correctness by the lights of our epistemic practices, as I put it. By the platitude (CT) that truth is the standard of correctness, it follows immediately that there is no objective standard of truth either, just truth by the lights of our epistemic practices. Nor, therefore, is there a standard external to our epistemic practices by which to evaluate whether our practices are justified; we can evaluate one practice only by the lights of another. Nor, similarly, is there a

standard external to our practices at which inquiry aims; rather, inquiry has an aim only in the thin, non-teleological sense internal to our practices. And nor, finally, do our words have meanings (correctness-conditions) over and above how they are actually used in practice. These claims about truth, justification, inquiry, and meaning may not count as ‘pragmatism’ on everyone’s definition, but let’s not fight over the term: they all involve a shift away from a human-independent notion of truth and onto *us*, a central theme of the pragmatist tradition by any measure.

Still, this does not mean that pragmatists (in this sense) must eliminate the word ‘true’ or stop theorizing about it. Exactly what they say about truth will depend on what they think the *point* of the word ‘true’ is, something I’ve left open here. They might think that ‘true’ is an explanatory notion that figures in our best theory of inquiry; this leads to the inflationism of section 4.2. Alternatively, they might think ‘true’ is not explanatory but a device of semantic ascent, *per* the deflationism of section 4.3. Yet another possibility is that the function of ‘true’ is to mark the fact that current belief is not sacrosanct and may be revised tomorrow in light of new evidence—current belief, that is, may not be ‘true’. This leads naturally to the epistemic theories of section 4.1, on which truth is something like long-run or idealized justifiability (understood “internally”, of course).

But whatever they say about truth, it holds (if it does) *only by the lights of our epistemic practices*. If truth is some kind of correspondence with reality, for example, that’s only because we happen to revolve around that relation by the lights of our (second-order) practices. Likewise if truth is some epistemic status, or a deflationary device of semantic ascent: whatever truth is, it is what it is only because we have a practice of *treating it as* truth. Whatever it is, truth is conditioned by practice. This is transcendental pragmatism.

Truthers, of course, reject this picture. On their view, truth is what it is independently of our practices; and it is in terms of that human-independent standard of truth that justification, inquiry, and meaning must ultimately be understood. But for that they need realism, the claim that one standard is *normatively significant* over the rest. For only then is there an *objective* standard of correctness, over and above correctness by our lights; and only then can we make sense of their idea that inquiry is constrained by something outside of ourselves, so to speak.

I therefore see the issue of realism vs anti-realism that I characterized in section 3 as marking a deep divide in the philosophy of truth and inquiry. This divide cross-cuts other, more familiar divides such as inflationism vs deflationism, correspondence vs epistemic theories of truth, and so forth. Much contemporary philosophy has focused on these latter divides, perhaps because of an underlying assumption that they will settle whether the truther or the pragmatist picture is correct, i.e. of whether there is a human-independent constraint on inquiry (and justification, meaning, etc). A correspondence theory would vindicate the truthers, for example, while an epistemic theory would vindicate the pragmatists. But I hope to have shown that this is not the case: with regards the question of whether inquiry is constrained by something objective outside of ourselves, the realism vs anti-realism divide is where the action really lies.

I haven’t said much about whether we should be realists or anti-realists. I did show in section 3 that realism requires primitive normativity: the property of being normatively significant,

remember, must be a *sui generis* normative property over and above the natural (and super-natural) world order. Anyone who rejects primitive normativity, therefore, is *already* committed to anti-realism. That's why I said at the beginning that my path to pragmatism proceeds from a claim that many would-be truthers already accept.

Beyond this, I won't try to argue against realism here. But let me end by gesturing at why I find it incredible (I have developed this argument elsewhere). In brief, even if there were this *sui generis* property of normative significance that a certain standard has, I see no reason to care about it.³¹ To illustrate, consider some obvious platitudes about reference and truth: "birds" refers to birds; "pigs" refers to pigs; "birds fly" is true if and only if birds fly; "pigs fly" is true if and only if pigs fly. Since pigs don't fly, the sentence 'pigs fly' is false (obviously!). But it does satisfy *some* standard S or other, and according to realism it is conceivable that *that* standard S is the one with normative significance. That standard does not satisfy the above platitudes, of course, and hence doesn't count as truth *by our lights*. But for realists, it is conceivable that S is the *objective* standard of correctness nonetheless; let us call it *real-truth* to mark this fact, and whatever word-world relation goes along with it *real-reference*. Thus it is conceivable that 'pigs' refers to pigs but *really*-refers to birds, so that 'pigs fly' is false but *really*-true! According to realism, this is a coherent hypothesis about the actual world.³²

What of it? One objection is epistemic: that realism engenders a strange skepticism on which for all we know, everything we believe to be true—including our everyday beliefs and our best scientific theories—is *indeed true* but really-false!³³ But my objection is different: it's that *this* kind of "error" shouldn't concern us in the slightest. The possibility we're contemplating is just that our best scientific theories don't meet a standard with some *sui generis* property. But so what? There are *countless* standards our theories don't meet, such as the standard of quoth—who cares if one of those standards happens to possess some *sui generis* property? It's a minor curiosity at most. It would be absurd to suggest that we scrap 500 years of post-enlightenment science and develop a new theory on which pigs fly! Thus, even if some standard has this *sui generis* property, it's just another standard out there along with quoth. To strike out in a radical effort to uncover it, insisting that *pigs really do fly*, would be, quite literally, madness.

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³¹ This objection to normative primitivism in the ethical domain is well known; see Dreier (2015) for an overview. I developed the objection in (Dasgupta 2017) and applied it to norms of metaphysics in (Dasgupta 2018). The thought here is that the objection applies equally to norms of language and thought.

³² What if a realist stipulates, as an axiom governing 'normative significance', that a standard is normatively significant only if it satisfies our platitudes? This is analogous to a strategy that Jonathan Schaffer (2016) recommends in other disputes. The strategy may have merits in some cases, but in this instance it is toothless. For one thing, it implies only that the hypothesis under consideration is not metaphysically possible, which is consistent with my claim here that it is conceivable (i.e., a coherent hypothesis about the actual world). For another thing, it concedes too much to the anti-realist because it ties real-truth to truth-by-our-lights, and the *whole point* of realism is to maintain that the former is something over and above the latter. I hope to develop these ideas elsewhere. Thanks to Ezra Rubenstein for a discussion of these issues.

³³ See Button (2013).

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