The New Pragmatism, Anti-essentialism, and What is Universal:
It’s The Situation All The Way Down

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A well-known scientist once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the Earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?"

"You're very clever, young man," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!"

Introduction

“New Pragmatism” attacks the very foundation of pragmatic thought by denying that we may ever have any definitive experience. As what we are experiencing is up for grabs, we can never know any situation that we may encounter, and we are left to ground both our knowledge and our values in our language games alone. This paper argues that this set of claims is founded on two errors, one regarding the nature of language games and the other regarding the nature of deconstruction. The “Old Pragmatism,” by way of contrast, is non-essentialist but not anti-essentialist, and it resolves the problem of how we might know “the situation,” given the subjectivity of our observations and the contingencies of our language games, by suggesting that our experiences can be understood as existing in, and constituted by, the totality of their particular instances or modes at the time of inquiry. By proceeding heuristically and collaboratively in constructing a representation of our experiences we can know the situation as those characteristic experiences that are relevant to those concerned at the time.

Pragmatism and Essentialism
Pragmatism is both non-foundationalist and non-essentialist. As a mode of thought, it rebuffs any suggestion that it is ever necessary to ground our values, choices or beliefs in either eternal principles or essential characteristics (Cotter 1996, 2085). From our situation-specific and contingent interests alone are constructed equally contingent and context specific categories, concepts and ethics (Tamanaha 1996, p. 315). Useful ways of thinking and valuing may be discovered only by way of problem-solving praxis *in situ*, as it is the situation alone that serves to “disconnect the whirring machinery of philosophical abstraction from practical business” (Posner 1995, 463). And perhaps most importantly, grounding our deliberations in “the situation” allows us to “arrest the postmodern tendency toward detached symbolic hyperreality” (Fox & Miller 1995, 9). So, for the pragmatist, our praxis in “the situation” is constitutive of both our values and our most useful concepts, principles, and epistemologies.

But while pragmatism is non-essentialist, it is not anti-essentialist. Anti-essentialism involves more than the deconstruction of claims that there are intrinsic essences and the recognition that all concepts, identities, and categories are socially constructed. It involves as well the idea that granting any sort of essence to our concepts and categories will lead necessarily to relationships of domination that will be secured structurally, ideologically and discursively. And it expects that these relationships will not only advantage the few and trouble the many, but marginalize or exclude certain ideas and certain interests from our discourse, thereby marginalizing or excluding certain kinds of people from the benefits of our societies as well (see, e.g., Fuss 1990).

The construction of essences must be resisted mightily. It is not enough, for example, to simply recognize that there is no finite set of characteristics that defines, say, a situation or our experiences in it. We must go further and deconstruct “the situation” to insure the relativity of all meaning and values that we may imagine are implied necessarily thereby.

Nothing in pragmatism, however, suggests that relationships of domination will occur necessarily from the construction of essences, nor that such relationships will result necessarily in marginalization or exclusion; nor even that should all of this happen it would be bad necessarily. Rather, collaborative problem-solving praxis in “the situation” is not only constitutive of useful concepts and principles, but of useful essences as well. For example, pragmatism entertains the emergence of certain potential outcomes, and the preclusion of others, as essential characteristics of “the situation,” much in the way that physicists do in speaking of

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“Schrodenger’s cat,” a “thought experiment” demonstrating how indeterminacy may be resolved by taking action in a situation, thereby precluding “blurred models” as a useful representation of reality.6

The “New Pragmatism”

Comes now a “new pragmatism,” with a “big difference” (Miler 2005, 248).7

“New pragmatists do not revere experience in the same way Dewey did. The word experience, in its attempt to denote a relationship with a presence [the situation], is accessible only by isolating its specific meaning in a particular linguistic system” (Miler 2004, 244).

Moreover,

“A situation rarely fixes attention so tightly that it can supersede ideography — ideology, imagery, beliefs, dogma, or sedimented assumptions about the way the world is or should be. Situations come and go; they can alter ideographs, but they do not take precedence over the attitudes, beliefs, and mental maps that encumber all who would contemplate instrumental action” (Miller 2005, 364).8

“Old pragmatists,” then, though they struggled mightily, were mired in essentialism and “never to escape the notion that what [they themselves] said about experience described what experience itself looked like” (Rorty 1982, 79).9 New pragmatists avoid this by taking the “postmodern turn” and “focusing our attention on the relation between language and the rest of the world rather than between experience and nature” (Rorty 1985, 40).10 This is an advantage because “Language” is a more suitable notion than “experience” for saying holistic and anti-foundational things... [and] because the malleability of language is a less paradoxical notion than the

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6 A cat is placed in a box, together with a radioactive atom and a geiger-counter. If the atom decays, and the geiger-counter detects an alpha particle, a hammer hits a flask of prussic acid, killing the cat. Hence there is a coupling of quantum and classical domains. Before the observer opens the box, the cat’s fate is tied to the wave function of the atom, which is itself in a superposition of decayed and undecayed states. Thus, said Schroedinger, the cat must itself be in a superposition of dead and alive states before the observer opens the box, “observes” the cat, and “collapses” it’s wave function. http://www.lassp.cornell.edu/ardlouis/dissipative/Schrcat.html
malleability of nature or of objects” (Rorty 1985, 40). So, the new pragmatist insists that we deconstruct our language, not for what it might tell us about power relationships, but for what it might tell us about our beliefs. By making sure that “All talk about doing things to objects must... be [paraphrased] as talk about reweaving beliefs” (Rorty 1991, 98), the “new pragmatism” seeks to purge our thought of essentialism and bring us to the realization that progress is accomplished only through the “development of particular vocabularies” (Rorty 1985, 41).

Now because experience and situation are so tightly drawn, each being impossible without the other, and because, as the “new pragmatists” say, “Like fact, or evidence, experience is a word-shaped object whose meaning is up for grabs,” (Miler 2004, 244), so we must conclude that “the situation” itself must be a word-shaped object whose meaning is up for grabs as well. Its meaning must only be accessible by way of a particular linguistic system in which it may be used.

For these reasons, the new pragmatists continue,

“a situation is often but a window of opportunity for carrying out an ideological project that had been awaiting the right moment to express itself...the concept situation, employed by [old] pragmatists as one of the keystones of their philosophical system (experience being another prominent symbol that functions in the same way), may not work in the way they want it to. Phenomenological and pragmatic terms such as experience, situation, life world, and existence are foundational artifices in a metaphysics of existence” (Miller 2004, 363).

The upshot of the new pragmatism, then, is no sort of pragmatism at all. Rather it is yet another example of what philosophers and critical theorists style the “postmodern turn,” a discourse exhibiting a radical disinclination for metaphysics matched with an immoderate proclivity for deconstruction. The “new pragmatism,” avidly in pursuit of metaphysical demystification, is anti-essentialist and so rails against the slightest hint of a suggestion that signifier and signified have any real relationship. So “the situation” may signify practically anything at all. And by way of deconstruction, the new pragmatists, like the radically postmodernists, seek “to ‘take apart’ those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought,” including not only the meaning of “the situation,” but any idea of a community that might be sharing interests as well. We are left, then, unhinged from anything other than the particular group interests that a

particular linguistic system was constructed to serve. And "the situation" is now recast as simply a symbol without any real link to anything other than the language games of particular interests. In practice, all uses of the term become analogous to a set of masks whose features must bear family resemblances to one another, otherwise we could not recognize the claims expressed by the wearer, but which are in fact merely disguises employed to legitimate the exercise of naked power.

Two Errors

But the "new pragmatists have made two great mistakes. First they have mistaken the nature of a language game; and second, they have mistaken what it means to deconstruct. Regarding language games, the "New Pragmatism's" vaunted malleability of words, and the anti-foundationalism derived therefrom, both follow from Wittgenstein's insight that the meaning of any word depends upon our purposes, that no particular word is itself a necessary signifier of any particular thing, and that words themselves signify no essence. Philosophical and theoretical problems arise when we forget this and look for essential characteristics that we assume two objects, or even situations, must share if the same word is applied to them (say, "vacation"). Wittgenstein explains that rather than sharing an essence, the objects or situations in question need share only a "family resemblance" to justify our extending the application of term to both. And hence the "New Pragmatist" conclusion that what objects are, what experiences are, and what situations are, depends solely upon the "development of particular vocabularies" and the particular linguistic system in which any "word shaped object" may be used.

But the fact that words are malleable in the sense of being capable of extenuation by way of "family resemblences" does not explain why an existing usage is as it is. Most often, that usage is explained by modeling, teaching the use of terms by our practice in context. But, Wittgenstein reminds us, we cannot explain how we continue a series (continue to use a word) according to a rule (a set of modeled applications in context) by referring to some insight or intuition into the nature of the rule (the modeled applications). Something more than modeling and family resemblances must account for the understanding of what counts as a correct (meaningful) continuation of a word's use. There must be some other relationship that holds among the uses of a word.

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That relationship is the sharing of a “form of life.” While the meaning of a word is not a “representation of reality,” not an arbitrary utterance either. Rather, its meaning is “tethered to the rules of situated language games and to the human participants” and cannot be understood “outside of participants’ meaning making in a community.” In brief, words have definitive meanings that may be explained by their use in the language games that we find embedded in the concrete customs and practices constituting our “form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1974: 59). “The context of daily life contains habit and routine… [or] recursive practices… that generate linguistic customs that constitute participants’ meaning making.” Hence, the stable background of recursive practices, including recursive ways of employing “experience” in discourse, constitutes the meaning of experience itself. Of course, the “background of language, customs, and practices… can… be changed.” However, “claims make sense only when they fit into some preexisting conceptual scheme taken as coherent by an epistemic community.”

In other words, some properties of a situation, those properties that constitute a form of life, are essential to the meaningful use of a word if what we are saying is to be intelligible. And as these essential properties arise in the process of a language game, these properties are neither arbitrary nor causal but constitutive of the word’s use and so essential to it.

With regard to their second mistake, it must be admitted in their defense that the term “deconstruction” is its own worst enemy. It suggests, to many reasonable people, the loss of all meaning, the radical relativism of all values, and the futility of all beliefs. But in fact, it is not the abandonment of meaning, but only a way of demonstrating that there is no abstract essence to any word and no transcendental significance to any discourse. It demonstrates, rather, that there are humanly constructed essences to words and that we are responsible both for what they mean and what they are in practice. And far from suggesting the relativity of all values or the futility of all belief, it throws into sharp relief both the purport of differing values and the consequences of discordant beliefs. “Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness to the other” (Derrida 1984, 124). If anything is in fact destroyed by deconstruction, it is not any discourse, but the claim to an unequivocal domination by one discourse over another.

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16 Ibid, 679.
20 Ibid, p676
So deconstruction augments discourse in order to deepen meaning, to explicate values, and to elucidate belief.

The openness offered by deconstruction stems from the observation that whenever particular interests construct and participate in a discourse, they communicate certain things over and above, or aside from, or even quite the opposite of, what they suppose. There is something important to be gathered from the gaps, contradictions, and ambiguities of any discourse, as well as from constructing a counter-discourse that inverts the meanings of key terms. And this is an enticing thing to do because concepts, principles, and the discourses that employ them can be understood fully, to the Western mind at least, only in relation to their opposites.

And “old pragmatists” recognize this explicitly in their concept of “experience”. To “old pragmatists” the quandary produced by attempting to know “the situation” by way of it’s finite characteristics given the contingencies of both our observations and our language games, is resolved by pointing out that both people and societies customarily wish to survive and to flourish. In these pursuits they will most often not only respond to what they believe to be the realities of their situation, but govern their beliefs about what “the situation” is by the norm of responsiveness to the perceived realities about them.23 Given that people and societies are thus committed to changing their social practices in response to what they believe to be true based upon that commitment, they must also be committed to changing their decisions regarding both what their experiences are and what “the situation” is. In other words, they will most often be committed, as Dewey argues, to a process of collaborative inquiry and learning24 that grounds their idea of experience and “the situation” in an ongoing assessment, integration, and harmonizing of (1) generally accepted moral principles, (2) community and society-wide attitudes, values and beliefs, (3) the dictates of experience and (4) the evidence of scientific investigations. It is from this process of collaborative inquiry and learning that useful constituents of “the situation” arise, and the essential characteristics (experiences) of “the situation” can be understood as existing only in, and constituted by, the totality of their particular instances or modes as understood at the time of such inquiry.

Concomitantly, any single representation of “the situation,” as it must occur in discourse, provides necessarily both a means of access to all other such representations as the terms employed must share family resemblances if they are to be understood at all, and the terms of its own critique as well. Put another way, any discourse on “the situation” is not only an attempt to define the parameters of our experiences and so the parameters of our personal behaviors, institutional practices, societal purposes, political decisions, and economic choices in ways that

favor some to the detriment of others. Nor is it inherently and inescapably a pretence for the oppressive exercise of power. Rather, it is also the locus for a multi-vocal disputation over the proper meaning of “our experiences” and “the situation” as well. Even as it communicates the distinct messages of the particular interests that it is constructed to serve, it simultaneously points to what it opposes, devalues, and does not understand. For this reason, any depiction of “our experiences” and “the situation” is a site of conflict and resonance with all other interests that are claiming attention. And for this reason as well, deconstruction uncovers the cultural inclinations, continuing conflicts, ultimate aspirations, power structures, tensions, and ambiguities among, for example, not only liberal, conservative, capitalist, and egalitarian discourses but the discourses of the oppressed as well.

Thus, “the situation” is not merely a mask disguising a naked exercise of power given the ultimate meaningless of all terms, the radical relativism of all values, and the futility of all beliefs. The meaning of “our experiences” and “the situation,” the values they puts at stake, and the beliefs upon which they are grounded, are “out there,” but while it is true that they cannot be located anywhere other than in characteristics (experiences) of the situation understood as existing only in, and constituted by, the totality of their particular instances or modes as formulated by the discourses themselves, it is not true that “our experiences” or “the situation” may mean just anything at all. Signifiers have meaning, they are not vacant masks waiting to be worn by just any interest. They have meaning as given by the dynamic context of social life from within which they arise and within which they have their application. Consequently, “our experiences” and “the situation,” while not signifying anything permanent, nevertheless derive their meaning, and so an essence, from our shared “form of life;” and as that changes so does the nature, the meaning, and the essence of “the situation.” The meaning or nature of “the situation” is in this sense “indeterminate” only abstractly, only from a point of view that we imagine we can have if we were to disengage from our embeddedness in our form of life; and while meaning is neither a matter of strict logic nor universal necessity, it is not arbitrary either. It is socially and humanly coherent. Abstractly it isn’t essentially any particular thing, but in our lives it can’t be just anything at all. The meaning of “our experiences” and “the situation” has essences exactly to the extent that our form of life and its transformations are coherent.

How do we know the situation?

So, given that we can know “our experiences” and “the situation,” and given non-essentialism, how do Pragmatists suggest that we come to know our experiences and the situation? How do they suggest that we come to know the essential characteristics each given that they exist only in, and are constituted by, the totality of their particular instances or modes? Well, to begin, Pragmatists understand “knowing” as a mode of belief. We do not begin to know, they observe, with Cartesian universal doubt; such a state is epistemically impossible. Nor do we begin with
“first impressions of sense” because “we say what each part of the sensible continuum is,” and so live and experience within a “conceptual order” (James 1911, 188). Rather, in true Wittgensteinian fashion, they begin by observing what is going on as we employ the terms. And as they point out, we begin by “forgetting that our very percepts are the results of cognitive elaboration,” and setting out from the only state of mind from which we can set out, “namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do set out, a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would; and who knows whether, if you could, you would not have made all knowledge impossible to yourself?” (Thayer 1982, 107).

In other words, they begin as we all begin, in the only way that it is possible to begin. They begin by believing that we know certain things, certain precepts; and because of our certainty, because of our belief in these precepts, we begin to act upon them. From this dynamic dimension of belief arises not only our knowledge of both “our experiences” and “the situation,” but the “irritation of doubt” that is the basis of both our inquiry into our experiences and the situation and our struggle to a state of “relief,” a new state of belief that we know “the situation.” Belief and “real and living doubt,” therefore, are constituent of “our experiences” and “the situation,” they are how we come to know what our experiences and the situation are (Thayer 1982, 61-100).

So, about one point the “new pragmatists” and the “old pragmatists” agree. We begin to think that we know from starting points dependent upon where and who we are. As James the “old pragmatist” says,

“[t]he world experienced (otherwise called the ‘field of consciousness’) comes at all times with our body as its center, center of vision, center of action, center of interest ... So far as ‘thoughts’ and ‘feelings’ can be active, their activity terminates in the activity of the body ... The word ‘I,’ then, is primarily a noun of position...” (Thayer 1982, 154-55).

But, contrary to what the “new pragmatists” suggest, “old pragmatists” recognize that we cannot do otherwise. All inquiries begin in situ necessarily; we can begin to think about how to characterize our experiences and the situation differently or more fully “only after the territory has been explored, and only after you have [construed the situation] can it serve... further explorations (Sleeper 1992, 184.)” It is in this sense that Dewey characterizes situations as

“immediate in their direct occurrence, and mediating and mediated in the temporal continuum constituting life-experience” (Boydston 1991, 30).

The anti-essentialism of “New Pragmatists,” on the other hand, holds that as no situation has any modal properties except relative to a conceptualization (such as a description for example), there is no unique, definitive set of experiences we may have and therefore no real concept or definition of “the situation;” any conception of it is but one among many that is possible. But to speak in this way is either to imagine that we may ascend to a universal vantage point, removing ourselves from who and where we are, or to pretend to the epistemically impossible luxury of the absolute skeptic. More correctly, an “old pragmatist” would say, we cannot know with absolute certainty whether there is or is not a universally essential characterization of either what “our experiences” really are or what “the situation” really is, the best that we can do is to offer reasons for our characterizations, keeping in mind as we go along that our experiences and “the situation,” and any revisionings thereof, are one among many that is made possible by particular discourses developed within a particular form of life; and that these discourses are most often, as it turns out, most effectively developed by way of a collaborative devised and “wide reflective equilibrium” that grounds social practices in an ongoing assessment, integration and harmonizing of (1) generally accepted moral principles, (2) community and society-wide attitudes, values and beliefs, (3) the pragmatic dictates of experience and (4) the evidence of scientific investigations (this is of course a working hypothesis). Within the particular discourses that our form of life has generated in this manner, and there are many, each discrete discourse, and any novel discourse made possible by our evolving form of life at the time, must strive for acceptance among all the others.

And so neither our experiences or “the situation” is up for grabs; they can be known. We are never without experience or outside the situation; we are never somewhere where we can choose how we might list. As the poet says, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” We find ourselves, in other words, necessarily in play upon a given stage, with roles among other characters, with a dialogue we must employ if we are to be understood (even by ourselves), and with a plot proceeding apace as directed by history and culture. We are subject necessarily to this largely invisible staging. In fact, the very discourse of the “news pragmatists,” the very idea that the situation is up for grabs, is determined by our situation, from our form of life, as well. Such an idea does not come to us from any radical form of skepticism, or from any phenomenology. This idea itself is discursively constructed from the features of our situation. As the old pragmatist says.

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"The more we examine the mechanism of thought, the more we shall see that the automatic, unconscious action of the mind enters largely into all its processes. Our definite ideas are stepping-stones; how we get from one to the other, we do not know: something carries us; we do not take the step" (Holmes 1871, 48)

That something that carries us is our form of life. And it is the cognizance of this that saves "old pragmatism" from "old essentialism." Cognizance of "the situation" as precept in our language game, and doubt about our precepts, allows us to know the essence of "the situation."

The Heuristic Procedure

But, more specifically, knowing the essence of a situation involves a certain procedure that is calculated to derive sound reasons for believing that we know the situation; reasons derived from collaborative problem-solving in the context of a social partnership, a form of relationship that entails collaboratively obtained knowledge placed in a reflexive equilibrium with our collaboratively derived values, traditions, preferences, and goals (Friedrich, 1963, pp. 219-222). And those reasons may be secured by proceeding heuristically.

Dewey characterizes the starting point for this procedure as the "antecedent condition of inquiry," and it is "disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc." (Dewey 1938, 105), and Peirce characterizes it as the "irritation" of doubt (Peirce 1955, [1877]). Now, Dewey does suggest that this condition is something more than subjective, that it is not merely a state of mind. As he says,

"The habit of disposing of the doubtful as if it belonged only to us rather than to the existential situation in which we are caught and implicated is an inheritance from subjectistic psychology... "The indeterminate situation comes into existence from existential causes, just as does, say, the organic imbalance of hunger. There is nothing intellectual or cognitive in the existence such situations..." (Dewey 1938, 106-107).

However, what is taken as "the situation," what is non-subjective and existential in any present inquiry, is the end-product of previous inquiries and so recognized as itself constructed previously. In other words, "the situation" must be taken as representative and not just as presented" (Dewey 1938, 114); and so proceeding heuristically involves first of all proposing a

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representation. That is, at some point we must formulate the situation (e.g., by drawing an analogy, formulating a logical or mathematical expression, or searching for a verbal formulation meeting our aspiration level).

Of course, in representing “the situation” different features may be forefronted. The decision-making literature, for example, suggests that individuals respond differently to the same problem depending upon how it is “framed” (Kuhberger 1998; Levin et al. 1998).30 (Kahneman and Tversky 1979),31 and that even simple adjustment to the way that we frame a situation can affect significantly our understanding of the situation (Lichtenstein and Slovic 1973; Huber et al. 1987; Medin et al. 1990).32 So we might frame “the situation” by way of “exemplars” or by way of “stories” learned through participation or initiation into a particular group (Kuhn, 1970).33 While such exemplars and stories provide “maps of action” (Ricoeur, 1991),34 because of “the irritation of doubt” insisted upon by “old pragmatists” and the fact that exemplars and stories are metaphoric necessarily, they admit of some flexibility and may also be used “to experimentally posit new resolutions to emerging problems” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, 983).35 Simultaneously, Pragmatists may look also for family resemblances between the situation and other situations (Wittgenstein, 1953), or choose an attribute or set of attributes (Levin et al.,1998),36 or “when choosing between two representations, choose the one with which [they] are most familiar” (Todd and Gigerenzer, 2000).37

But, again because of their doubt, or where they encounter the “apples and oranges” problem wherein the alternatively suggested attributes of an experience or a situation can neither be

36 Levin, I. P., S. L. Schneider, and G. J. Gaeth. 1998. All frames are not created equal: A typology and critical analysis of framing effects. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 76: 149-188.
compared directly nor reduced to a common currency, “old pragmatists” also seek to grasp the situation by engaging in some sort of search procedure. Where they have no idea what will be helpful, they may experiment randomly with different constructions of “the situation” (Elster, 1989), or employ successive constructions to eliminate more and more alternatives, or they may search for patterns of facts that have not been seen before (Todd and Gigerenzer, 2000). In fact, pragmatism allows of “any flight of imagination provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a possible practical effect” (Peirce 1992-94, vol. II, p. 235).

Finally, “old pragmatists” recognize that we always stop somewhere. “At some point” we quit “giving grounds” for believing that we understand our experiences and know “the situation.” The process ends, but we end it neither arbitrarily nor “in certain propositions striking us immediately as true... Ending “is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is [founded instead upon] our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.”

“We bear in mind, along with Wittgenstein, “that the language-game is... not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there - like our life.” Moreover, “Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, each man declares the other a fool and an heretic.” At this point, “At the end of reasons, comes persuasion;” and the success of persuasion depends ultimately upon a shared “form of life.” Or, as Dewey has said, “the agreement is agreement in activities, not intellectual acceptance of the same set of propositions” (Boydston 1991, 484).

Altogether, then, proceeding heuristically may be depicted in the following way.

42 Ibid. no.559
First, pragmatists observe that we nearly always begin by representing “our experiences” and “the situation” given the available information and what we understand to be our aspirations. We try, in other words, to understand “our experiences” and “the situation,” often by using such devices as exemplars, stories, maps, models, “family resemblances,” salient attributes, and “total immersion,” in order to interrelate what information we have. This may be sufficient to proceed to an agreement on “our experiences” and “the situation” by, for example, identifying familiar patterns, triggering analogies or facilitating logical deduction. If no representation integrates the information, or if all attempted representations are contested, or if all are productive of an “irritation of doubt,” we often proceed to search for novel representations. At this point, agreement is either reached or it isn’t. Agreement may be reached, for example, by “satisficing,” agreeing on a representation of the situation that may not be entirely satisfactory to anyone but good enough to everyone. Or we might agree upon one attribute that all agree upon as sufficient. If there is agreement, and implementation fails, we then employ different search techniques to re-represent (re-frame) the our experience and the situation and begin again. If there is no agreement, then we declare eachother fools and heretics.\(^{46}\)

Put another way,

“You show your wares and invite people to buy them. If your system [representation] strikes your readers as being simpler, more coherent, or more promising than any alternative for dealing with the recalcitrant difficulties of other systems [representations], then this may be a good reason to buy it” (Ellis 2001: 262).

The procedure might be analogized to a cost-benefit discourse wherein the costs of different representations are their “ideographies” and the benefits are the enlightening accounts of various troublesome phenomena that those ideographies are able to deliver. A good representation might nevertheless not work out the way we anticipate, of course, and then its back in search of a new agreement.

Rejoinder

Now, at this point the “new pragmatists” might reasonably rejoin that this whole procedure is exactly the problem. As they have said, “A situation rarely fixes attention so tightly that it can supersede ideography” (Miller 2005, 364). And so, all that is demonstrated by the heuristic procedure is the interplay of “sedimented assumptions” about the situation, each representation being “challengeable to the extent that it is already framed [and] imposing itself as an already categorized artifact of culture” (Miller 2005, 369).

To this objection it might be sufficient to say “exactly, but there is no alternative.” But “old pragmatists” have a more robust reply. What the “new pragmatists” describe, quite rightly it seems, are universal behaviors. All people everywhere, begin with “sedimented assumptions.” Every culture, every person, constructs these things, these “ideographies.” And “old pragmatists” accept this but, unlike the “New Pragmatists” who “focusing our attention on the relation between language and the rest of the world,” they shift our attention from these culturally constructed artifacts to the circumstances and facts of their creation and use; and they do this because they realize that these are expressions of the human “form of life.” That is, our form of life, our situation, has two dimensions. One is dependent on culture, context, and history. But, simultaneously, there is a common dimension, and it is this “common behavior of mankind” which is “the system of reference by means of which we interpret the situation across cultures, contexts, and history (Wittgenstein 1958, 206).” By shifting the locus of contingency away from language and cultural objects and phenomena in themselves to the decisions and actions of cultural participants, the “old pragmatists” realized that they could discover the humanly understood essence of any situation.

Another Rejoinder

But, the “new pragmatists” retort, all of this merely creates a “foundational artifice in a metaphysics of existence.” And, for good reason, this is anathema to “new pragmatists,” postmodernists, and “old pragmatists” alike. After all, the core problem of essentialism is that it must justify elevating any particular characteristic to the status of “essential.” The “old essentialism” provides an account of this “something extra” by way of one or another metaphysic; but the problem then becomes one of providing a widely acceptable explanation of why any metaphysic should be accepted. However, the “old pragmatism” actually offers no such metaphysic. It offers instead, warranted assertibility (Peirce 1931, 264; Dewey 1948, 331-53). Claims are assertions, say that we know “the situation.” and may be grounded in community

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values, customs, and norms. Grounds are given to support the claims, and they may consist of observations, statistics, or expert opinion, may be qualitative or quantitative, and they can include statistically valid studies, believable stories about people’s experience, or renderings of tradition. Warrants tie the grounds to the claims by making the claims seem reasonable and probable given the grounds. Warrants, in other words, lend weight to the grounds offered in support of claims or conclusions and justify leaping the always-present gap between the facts of a case and any claim decision (Toulmin, 1958). For Pragmatists the warrants themselves require a backing born out in practice. As applied here, the idea is that we are warranted in claiming that we know “the situation” once we practice collaboratively inquiry by way of the heuristic procedure.

This approach to knowing via warrants may be made more robust by suggesting that any characteristic of a situation may be considered essential by way of it’s “superassertability” (Wright 1992). That is, a statement to the effect that a characteristic may be considered truly essential is true itself if it possesses a warrant that cannot be defeated by any reasonably imaginable change to the state of our information. More specifically, “the superassertability theory of truth claims that a statement is true iff it ... is, or can be, warranted and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information” (Wright 1992, 48). Consider, for example, the following essentialist-like claim:

“The distinctions between the chemical elements, for example, are real and absolute. There is no continuum of elementary chemical variety which we must arbitrarily divide somehow into chemical elements. The distinctions between the elements are there for us to discover, and are guaranteed by the limited variety of quantum mechanically possible atomic nuclei” (Ellis 2001: 3).

To old and new pragmatists alike this is, of course, a decidedly a posteriori argument and so purely contingent. Given all of our current knowledge and everything that it currently implies, however, it is nevertheless superassertible. While it might be objected that the elements must not have essences as we can imagine possible worlds where a continuum of elementary chemical variety exists, we must remember that imaginability is not a reliable test of possibility (Mumford 2004, 52–54).

A Third Rejoinder

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Well, “new pragmatists” might say, what you say about the malleability of words holds only “intra-language games,” and non-essentialism may hold among language games, and certainly “trans-language games” to the extent, if any, that such a state is possible. It is possible that the properties of context that are constitutive of, or essential to, the meaningful use of a word can change completely from game to game.

But, as Wittgenstein points out, there can be no private language-game. Again, our form of life, our situation, has two dimensions. One ependent on culture, context, and history, another on the “common behavior of mankind” which is “the system of reference by means of which we interpret the situation across cultures, contexts, and history (Wittgenstein 1958, 206). While there is a sense in which significant things are hidden between human beings of different cultures and in different contexts, they are not hidden because they are out of sight but because we fail to recognize them (Wittgenstein 1958, 197). What is at issue is not ways in which unlikely beings may be imagined to have a language. If granted a language, the words of lions would still be unintelligible. We could not honestly say "I know what you mean" to a lion because understanding another involves empathy, which requires the kind of similarity that we just do not have with lions. What matters, in this context, is the human form of life, and that is what lends essence to our experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some implications of the pragmatic understanding of how we know our experiences and “the situation” are interesting to consider. It seems, for example, that this pragmatic method has three important implications that come immediately to mind. First, the recurrently popular idea that there are private experiences and situations is epistemologically untenable. This radical isolationism is founded upon the assumption that I cannot know whether another person’s experiences are like my own in similar circumstances. But the pragmatic idea is I cannot know my own experiences absent a form of life shared by others. How does coffee taste? Well, I only know because I have a language, mutually constructed. The problem I will encounter without that language is that in order to know that I am tasting coffee, to know that I am encountering a coffee drinking situation, I must be able to appeal to something independent of the experience and the situation. I may compare the sensation or mental picture I am having now with an image that I take to be a memory I have of the sensation or picture constituting the standard. But the supposed memory is itself incapable of being independently tested for correctness. Hence, absent shared, situational indicators, I have no means of telling whether I am experiencing coffee.

nothing is going to count as a consistent use of “coffee,” and the word “coffee” will be meaningless.

The second implication of this method of discovering “the situation”, is that although we may invent all kinds of “theories” as to what “the situation” is, no theory can ever be a final account. The theories are derived by us and “live” only within the dynamic context of social life from within which they arise and within which they have their application. They cannot be turned around to depict or portray the experiences themselves. Consequently, the essence of my experiences, of the situation, depends upon our “form of life, and while its essence is neither a matter of strict logic nor practical necessity, it is not arbitrary either. It is socially and “humanly” coherent. It has no abstract essence, but it can’t be just anything at all. The situation is coherent, it has an essence, exactly to the extent that our form of life and its transformations are coherent.

From this flows the third important implication. We are accountable, moment-to-moment for the essences of not only our own experiences and situations but the experiences and situations of others.” Although we may formulate “theories,” “laws,” “moral principles,” or “rules,” any claim that we have defined the situation by acting in accord with any of these, is an abdication of our social responsibility. The essence of our situation is dependent upon our practices and how we choose to continue and modify them. Defining our situations as logical implications or practical necessities given rules, principles, theories or laws, begs the question.