

Pragmatics and Pragmatisms

I. Introduction

Pragmatism can be thought of narrowly: as a philosophical school of thought centered on evaluating beliefs by their tendency to promote success at the satisfaction of wants. Its paradigmatic practitioners were the classical American triumvirate of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. But pragmatism can also be thought of more broadly: as a movement centered on the primacy of the practical, initiated already by Kant, whose twentieth century avatars include not only Peirce, James, and Dewey, but also the early Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, and such figures as Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Rorty, and Putnam. I think that the broader version of pragmatism is much more important and interesting than the narrower one. But I also think that an understandable tendency to bring the pragmatist tradition into relief by emphasizing features distinctive of that narrower conception has made it difficult to bring the broader one into focus. In this essay, I want to say something about the relations between the two. I'll start by distinguishing a number of commitments of different sorts that shape pragmatism in the broader sense. I'll then try to say how pragmatism in the narrower sense might be thought to fit into this constellation of ideas. I'll close by arguing against the utility of

the model of language (and thought generally) as a kind of *tool*, which is characteristic of the narrower construal of pragmatism.

II. Pragmatics and Semantics

Philosophers approach language from at least two quite different directions. Language can be seen as a kind of *practice* or *activity*, a kind of *doing*. What is most prominent from this point of view is language *use*—which falls into place as an aspect of the natural history of certain kinds of organisms. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as *language* using animals in much the same sense in which we are (to pick an example not wholly at random) *tool* using animals. Contrasting with this anthropological Wittgensteinean approach is a semantic Tarskian approach to language. Here the emphasis is not on the *use* of linguistic expressions, but on their *content* or *meaning*—not on the activity of saying but on what is said.¹

We can distinguish these approaches as focusing respectively on *pragmatics* and on *semantics*. Using the terminology this way, pragmatics is the systematic or theoretical study of the *use* of linguistic expressions, and semantics is the systematic or theoretical study of the *contents* they express or convey. This way of using the expression ‘pragmatics’ is different from some standard contemporary ones. According to one such use, the topic of pragmatic theory

is the semantics of expressions whose meaning varies with circumstances of use: paradigmatically indexicals and demonstratives.² According to another common contemporary usage, pragmatics studies the ways in which the broadly economic demands of efficient communication in the face of the potentially differing expectations of the parties to a conversation explain conventional practices of understanding one another. Here a paradigm is Gricean implicatures. The more inclusive usage I am recommending understands pragmatics as the study of Fregean *force* generally: of the moves one can use utterances to make in language games, encompassing the study of locutionary and illocutionary as well as perlocutionary force. A paradigmatic undertaking of a general theory of speech acts and practices of this sort would be trying to say what one should be understood as *doing* in making a claim or assertion.

It is possible to pursue the pragmatic and the semantic theoretical enterprises independently of one another. One might think, with some Wittgensteineans, that properly appreciating the variety of uses of expressions found in actual practice entails giving up the idea of a unitary conception of meaning somehow structuring them all. One might think, with some Tarskians, that actual usage is scarcely enlightened by an appreciation of semantics. The idea is that since we so often don't know what our terms refer to or what the facts are, learning from semantics about when it would in a semantic sense be correct to apply various expressions (for instance, when the claims made would be true) just doesn't tell the theorist much about how practitioners in fact are disposed to use them. Views that in these ways see pragmatics and semantics as autonomous disciplines wholly independent of one another represent extremes on the contemporary scene, however. It is much commoner for those who study linguistic practice and those who study content and meaning to assert systematic connections between their topics.

¹ It is important not to confuse the general distinction between Wittgensteinean/Tarskian with specific, more or less reductive versions of them: e.g. language use as modeled on tool use, content as modeled on representation.

² Not, oddly, also anaphoric expressions such as pronouns. I think this is for largely historical reasons (the assimilation of anaphoric pronouns to bound variables, which are treated in the strictly semantic part of the theory) and that this commitment has led to various sorts of distortions and misunderstandings—particularly of the role of deictic expressions. I discuss this issue in Chapter Seven of *Making It Explicit* (Harvard University Press, 1994) [hereafter, *MIE*].

‘Pragmatism’, as I understand and shall use the term, is a generic expression that picks out a family of views asserting various senses in which practice and the practical may be taken to deserve explanatory pride of place. One more determinate class of such views concerns the relations between pragmatics and semantics. In this more specific sense, a view deserves the appellation ‘pragmatism’ insofar as it insists that semantic theory must answer in various ways to pragmatic theory—for instance by asserting some sort of explanatory priority of pragmatics over semantics. Many sorts of priority are possible, so there are many sorts of pragmatism as well. We will do well to begin with some analytic work, to sort out some of the important variants. In what follows my aim will be to delineate and distinguish various views—with perhaps a few words about what motivates and attracts their proponents—rather than to endorse or argue for the views discussed.

III. Methodological Pragmatism

Here is a thesis characteristic of a kind of pragmatism: The *point* of talking about the content expressed or the meaning possessed by linguistic expressions is to explain at least some features of their use. This claim expresses commitment to what we might call ‘*methodological pragmatism*’.³ Pragmatism of this sort sees semantics as answering to pragmatics in the sense that pragmatic theory supplies the explanatory target of semantic theory—and hence is the ultimate source⁴ of the criteria of adequacy according to which the success of that theoretical enterprise is to be assessed. Here is a characteristic statement of Dummett’s:

[A] semantic theory which determines the truth-conditions of sentences of a language gets its point from a systematic connection between the notions of truth and falsity and the practice of using those sentences.⁵

Methodological pragmatism in this sense might be used as a criterion of demarcation distinguishing genuinely *semantic* theories from others. For example, consider Tarski’s topological semantics for the first order predicate calculus. Its underlying idea is that quantifiers can be understood as corresponding to topological closure operations.

Mathematically, it takes the form of a representation theorem: exhibiting a structure-preserving mapping relating sentences to objects in a topological domain. Now twentieth

³ The phrase is often used in other ways, as it is for instance in Nicholas Rescher’s book of that name. (*Methodological Pragmatism*, New York University Press, 1977.)

⁴ Which is not to say the *sole* source. Semantic theory might well supply additional, purely internal, criteria of adequacy: simplicity, compositionality, computability, and so on.

century mathematics is replete with representation theorems, but most of them are not properly thought of as underwriting specifically *semantic* claims. The Stone Representation Theorem, for instance, which correlates Boolean algebras with set-theoretic operations on power sets does not (at least by itself) constitute a semantics for anything. What is it that makes Tarski's representation theorem, but not Stone's qualify as a semantics? (The fact that one of the structures it relates is a formal language may be necessary, but is nowhere near sufficient.) Methodological pragmatism supplies an answer to this question. It is that Tarski's mapping reconstructs a crucial dimension of the *use* of expressions of first order quantification theory: namely the inferential consequence relation (and hence the property of logical theoremhood). His theory qualifies as a *semantic* theory precisely because and insofar as it serves the purposes of codifying this central feature of the practice of using quantificationally complex expressions.

Methodological pragmatism might also be appealed to in arguing that semantic theory ought not to appeal to certain sorts of theoretical objects. For instance, the overall argumentative strategy Quine pursues in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," can be understood as having this form. For there he finds wanting semantic theories that have as central elements a distinction between two sorts of true sentences: analytic ones, supposedly true in virtue of meaning alone, and synthetic ones, whose truth depends in addition on how things are in the extralinguistic world. He does so by asking what feature of the *use* of those sentences it is that is to be explained by this theoretical distinction. Canvassing various alternatives, such as immunity from revision, he concludes that there is nothing about linguistic practice that is explained by the semantic distinction in question. And on that basis he rejects semantic theories that treat it as central. (This

⁵ Frege's *Philosophy of Language* [New York: Harper and Row, 1973] p. 413. [Hereafter: *FPL*]

argument may or may not succeed; my point is just that the strategy it deploys is recognizably that here denominated ‘methodological pragmatism’.⁶)

Methodological pragmatism might usefully be compared with the principle that the point of postulating theoretical objects is to explain the behavior of observable ones. Such a commitment to what we might call methodological *empiricism* could also be appealed to as a criterion of demarcation, or in criticizing a particular theory. Thus, judicial astrology—trying to explain the vicissitudes of personal fortune on the basis of theoretical properties of the stars and planets—would at least count as an empirical theory, albeit a bad one. But if the *only* reason the theologian could give us for caring about which doctrine of the Trinity is correct is that unless we know that we can’t know who the true Pope is, then his theory would be disqualified, as not even aiming at the explanation of anything observable.

In the context of some auxiliary hypotheses, methodological pragmatism appears as a special case of methodological empiricism. Thus if one both believes that semantic properties are *not* observable, and restricts one’s account of linguistic practice or the use of language to features that *are* observable, then a commitment to methodological empiricism will entail a commitment to methodological pragmatism.

IV. Semantic Pragmatism

⁶ One who accepts the methodological pragmatism governing the argumentative strategy, but rejects the conclusion, is Wilfrid Sellars. He responds by pointing to a feature of the use of expressions that he thinks is usefully talked about in terms of the distinction between claims true (or inferences good) in virtue of relations among concepts and those only to be explained by appeal to matters of fact. His candidate is the difference between counterfactually robust claims, and those that are not: All the coins in my pocket are

A related, but I believe distinguishable, sort of pragmatism takes as its point of departure the plausible view that it is the way practitioners *use* expressions that makes them *mean* what they do. After all, just as *noises*—that is, apart from the way we use them, the role they play in our practices—our utterances don't *mean* anything. The noise 'horse' could mean anything (or nothing) at all, depending on how it came to be used. This truism at least motivates a methodological requirement on the semantic theorist: that whenever she associates with expressions some semantically relevant *whatsis* as its content or meaning, she undertakes an obligation to explain what it is about the use of that expression that establishes in practice the association between it and the semantically relevant *whatsis*. Thus a semantic theory that tells us to associate sets of possible worlds with utterances of declarative sentences as the propositions they express should be understood as issuing a promissory note to the effect that a pragmatic story can be told about what features of the use of those sentences (or their component words) it is in virtue of which it is related both to *any* set of possible worlds, and in particular to *that* set, rather than to a slightly different one.⁷ This sort of responsibility can be particularly onerous for a semantic theory that appeals to semantic interpretants that are either abstract objects, or very finely individuated. (Some possible worlds theorists have both problems.) I take it that the arguments Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein⁸ show that individuation can cause a problem in this context, quite apart from issues of abstractness.

copper. It does not follow that if that nickel were in my pocket, it would be copper, while it does follow that if this penny were not in my pocket it would still melt at 1,083° C.

⁷ This is a challenge that David Lewis responds to directly, in "Languages and Language", reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers* [Oxford University Press, 1983]

We might call this sense in which one can take it that semantics must answer to pragmatics ‘*semantic pragmatism*’. One way to see that it is different from what I called ‘*methodological pragmatism*’ is to think about the analogy with the relation between theoretical and observational vocabulary. We are accustomed to the idea that observations underdetermine theory. To say that is to say that the theorist is precisely *not* obliged to be able in every case to say what observations so or would entitle her to apply a certain theoretical term or to endorse a certain theoretical claim.⁹ Further, to insist on an account of what features of the use of an expression it is that confer on it the content associated with it—that in that sense establish the semantic association—is not yet to say, as Dummett sometimes does¹⁰, that one ought to be restricted in one’s choice of semantic interpretants to features of the use of the expressions so interpreted. Such a restriction would be the analogue of instrumentalism about theoretical entities: insisting that one not postulate anything unobservable in order to explain observable goings-on. We might call

⁸ In *Wittgenstein on rules and private language : an elementary exposition* [Harvard University Press, 1982]

⁹ This is a delicate point. I follow Sellars (see Wilfrid Sellars’ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* with an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom [Harvard University Press, 1997], pp. 79ff. and 162-166) in taking the distinction between theoretical and observable entities to deal not with the kind of thing they are, but only with our mode of access to them. A concept counts as theoretical at a given time if its only conditions of appropriate application (according to the practices that govern it at that point in time) are inferential: it cannot be applied in the making of a report noninferentially elicited from an observer by the perceptible presence of the state of affairs in question. But what is theoretical in this sense at one time can become observable at another: Pluto was originally postulated inferentially, but later became observable. It did not alter its ontological status thereby, but only its epistemic relation to us. One can be a realist in this sense about theoretical entities, and still maintain that the *point* of postulating merely inferentially accessible entities is to explain the antics of observable ones.

¹⁰ Here is a representative passage:

“[M]ost philosophical observations about meaning embody a claim to perceive... a simple pattern: the meaning of a sentence consists in the conditions for its truth and falsity, or in the method of its verification, or in the practical consequences of accepting it. Such dicta cannot be taken to be so naive as to involve overlooking the fact that there are many *other features of the use of a sentence than the one singled out as being that in which its meaning consists*: rather, the hope is that we shall be able to give an account of the connection that exists between the different aspects of meaning. One particular aspect will be taken as central, as constitutive of the meaning of any given sentence...; all other features of the use of the sentence will then be explained by a uniform account of their derivation from *that feature taken as central*.”

[emphasis added] *FPL* pp. 456-7.

such a view “semantic pragmatism in the *narrow* sense,” contrasting that with the broad sense defined above.

The differences between what I’ve called ‘methodological’ and ‘semantic’ pragmatism are subtle.¹¹ For instance, one might read Quine in “Two Dogmas...” as asking what it is about the use of sentences in virtue of which they deserve to be semantically interpreted as true in virtue of meanings alone. That would be to read him as a semantic pragmatist, rather than as a methodological pragmatist. But there is a real difference of explanatory order between these strategic commitments. The methodological pragmatist looks at the explanation of the practice of using expressions, the subject of pragmatics, in terms of the contents associated with those expressions, the subject of semantics. The semantic pragmatist looks at the explanation of the association of contents with expressions in terms of the practice of using those expressions. While those explanations may be facets of one story, they need not be.

V. Significance of the Vocabulary in which Use is Specified

¹¹ The author of *MIE*, for instance (who might be expected to know better) does not clearly distinguish between these two sorts of methodological commitment.

The semantic pragmatist is in a very general sense a functionalist about content. While the meanings studied by semantics may not *consist* in the roles played by expressions in linguistic practice (meaning need not be *identified* with use), according to this view those roles must at least *establish* the connection between contents, meanings or semantic interpretants, on the one hand, and linguistic expressions on the other. The semantic pragmatist's basic insight is that there is nothing apart from the use of expressions that *could* establish such connections. And this is surely correct—if we construe the notion of *use* broadly enough.

I've been talking about 'use' as though we all knew and agreed about what that term means. Of course that is not so. The specifications of both the varieties of pragmatism I've offered so far leave unspecified some crucial parameters. And for each of those parameters there are some values that would trivialize the claims in question.

One such parameter is the vocabulary one is allowed to use in describing the practices that are the use of linguistic expressions. If one is allowed to use the full resources of *semantic* vocabulary in specifying the use—describing an operator as “used so as to express negation,” or a term as “used to refer to Leibniz”—then the requirements of semantic pragmatism will automatically be met. For in that case one can easily point to the features of the use of those expressions that establish their association with their semantic interpretants. Another such parameter is the sort of interpretant associated with expressions by semantic theory. If one picks some aspect of the use of expressions—say, assertibility conditions (on some renderings of such conditions)—as the semantic

interpretants, then the requirements of methodological pragmatism will automatically be met. For in that case the relevance of semantics to pragmatics comes for free: the semantic features of the language are just a subset of the pragmatic ones.¹²

Typically, when philosophers of language put forward claims about the relations between pragmatics and semantics—for instance, versions of methodological or semantic pragmatism—they have in mind, at least implicitly, some sort of restrictions on the vocabulary in which pragmatic and semantic features of the language are specified. They are thinking of specifying linguistic behavior in a naturalistic vocabulary, for instance, or thinking of semantics in terms of truth conditions and reference relations. Once those presuppositions are made explicit, claims about how semantic theory must answer to pragmatic theory become substantive. Some of these specifications—and I have in mind here particularly those directed at the vocabulary one is allowed to use in describing linguistic practice—are themselves associated with varieties of pragmatism. A couple of these are considered in what follows.

VI. Fundamental Pragmatism

¹² Notice that according to the pragmatist theses, other claims about use will have consequences for semantics (besides just the issue of what vocabulary one is allowed to use in specifying use). For instance, if one believes that speech acts are the fundamental unit of the use of language, then the semantic interpretants associated with expressions whose utterance can be used to perform a speech act will have a certain kind of priority over the interpretants associated with expressions whose utterance is in principle only ever significant as part of the utterance of a compound expression that can be so used. (The priority of

It is characteristic of pragmatists in the broad sense to see knowing *how* as having a certain kind of explanatory priority over knowing *that*. This is one influential form taken by an insistence on the explanatory primacy of the practical over the theoretical. Explicit theoretical beliefs can be made intelligible only against a background of implicit practical abilities. Pragmatism in this sense—call it ‘*fundamental* pragmatism’—is opposed to the kind of platonistic intellectualism that seeks to explain practical abilities in terms of some sort of grasp of *principles*: some sort of knowing that behind each bit of know how. That sort of intellectualism was the dominant philosophical approach until at least the nineteenth century. Among the contemporary heirs of this tradition are programs in cognitive science that are committed to explaining an organism’s capacities to navigate around and cope with various environments and environmental features by postulating the presence of internal representations of those environments and features.

Opposing intellectualism by seeing the capacity to know or believe *that* something is the case as parasitic on more primitive kinds of know *how*—capacities to *do* something that is not yet saying, thinking, or believing anything—is the basic thesis of the first part of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.¹³ It is this fundamental pragmatism that links his thought of the twenties to Dewey’s thought of the same decade (much to Heidegger’s later chagrin).¹⁴ It is the basis of criticisms by contemporary pragmatists such as Dreyfus and

the propositional would be one consequence one might come to in this way, given some further auxiliary hypotheses.)

¹³ See Hubert Dreyfus’ *Being-in-the-world : a commentary on Heidegger’s Being and time, division I* [Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1991.], and my “Heidegger’s Categories in Being and Time,” *Monist*, vol. 66 #3, July 1983, pp. 387–409. Reprinted in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (eds.) *Heidegger : A Critical Reader* (Blackwell; Oxford) 1992 pp. 45–64. Reprinted in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 45 (1997) 4, pp. 531-549, Reiner Ansén (trans.).

¹⁴ See Richard Rorty’s “Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey”, pp. 37-59 in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982].

Haugeland of the project of classical artificial intelligence, which depends on being able to make explicit in the form of claims, rules, and principles, all of the practical know how that is implicit in the everyday skills and capacities to cope with the environment deployed by intelligent creatures.¹⁵

One consideration that has been taken to motivate this sort of pragmatism is the kind of regress argument epitomized by Lewis Carroll's "Achilles and the Tortoise."¹⁶ Beliefs would be idle unless the believer could at least sometimes tell what followed from them (what else they committed the believer to) and what was incompatible with them. (Even if they might still in some sense be said to have propositional contents, those contents wouldn't make a difference to the believer.) But distinguishing the potential beliefs that are incompatible with a given belief, and those that are its inferential consequences is a practical skill or ability: a kind of know how. This sort of ability or know how cannot be taken in every case to be codified in the form of an explicit, propositionally contentful belief (say, conditional beliefs, including conditionals whose consequent is negated), on pain of an explanatorily unproductive infinite regress. Being able explicitly to believe *that p* (endorse a theory) presupposes a background of practical implicit know how. An even more direct version of this argument is available to those pragmatists, like Sellars, who insist on specifically *linguistic* practice as essential to the capacity so much as to entertain propositions. If, as he claims, grasping a *concept* is practically mastering the use of a suitable *word*, then it is clear such mastery cannot in every case itself be explained in terms of prior grasp of a concept.

¹⁵ In Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do: a critique of artificial reason* [New York, Harper & Row, 1972], and the papers collected in John Haugeland *Having Thought* [Harvard University Press, 1998].

Fundamental pragmatism enforces a restriction on the vocabulary a semantic pragmatist can use to describe the linguistic practices that establish the association of semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions. A semantic pragmatist who is also a fundamental pragmatist cannot use exclusively *intentional* vocabulary in describing the use of language. It follows that, from the point of view defined by these two strategic theoretical commitments, accounts of meaning such as that of Grice must be deemed essentially incomplete. For his account of what it is to use a linguistic expression with a certain meaning appeals only to propositionally and conceptually contentful beliefs and intentions. According to the fundamental pragmatist, such an account leaves out the implicit background of not explicitly conceptual abilities presupposed by the capacity to have explicitly conceptually contentful beliefs and intentions. The fundamental semantic pragmatist need *not*, however, be committed to the possibility of explaining the association of semantic interpretants with expressions in terms of linguistic practice specified entirely in nonintentional terms. This view might be called “*reductive fundamental semantic pragmatism*.” Such a reductive project (about which more will be said later) would depend on further collateral metatheoretical commitments.

Fundamental pragmatism does, however, open the door for the characteristically twentieth century view that might be called “*linguistic pragmatism*.”¹⁷ This is the view that engaging in specifically *linguistic* practices is an essential necessary condition for having thoughts and beliefs in a full-blooded sense. The view of Sellars, adverted to

¹⁶ *Mind* 4 [1895]: pp. 278-280.

above, according to which possession of a concept just consists in mastery of a word, is a cardinal instance. Davidson's linguistic pragmatism is encapsulated in his claim that to be a believer one must be an interpreter of the speech of others.¹⁸ Dummett give voice to an even more extreme version of this commitment when he says:

We have opposed throughout the view of assertion as the expression of an interior act of judgment; judgment, rather, is the interiorization of the external act of assertion.¹⁹

¹⁷ I do not mean to be denying that earlier philosophers—such as Herder and Hegel—subscribed to this view.

¹⁸ “Thought and Talk” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1984].

¹⁹ *FPL* p. 362.

VII. Normative Pragmatics

Theorists pursuing any of the varieties of pragmatist explanatory strategies considered so far must worry about what vocabulary it is appropriate to employ in pragmatic theory—that is, in specifying the practices of using linguistic expressions which:

- i) are to be explained by semantics, according to methodological pragmatism,
- ii) establish the association of linguistic expressions with semantic interpretants, according to semantic pragmatism, and
- iii) constitute the practical know *how* against the background of which alone the capacity to know, believe, or think *that* can be made intelligible, according to fundamental pragmatism.

The suggestion concerning that vocabulary that is most important for understanding the relation between classical pragmatism and the broader tradition of pragmatism in which it is embedded is, I think, that any pragmatics whose concept of practice is a serious candidate for playing the three roles just adverted to must employ *normative* vocabulary.

This thought has a distinguished pedigree. One of Kant's most basic ideas is that what distinguishes our judgments and actions from the responses of merely natural creatures is that they are things we are in a distinctive way *responsible* for—that they involve the undertaking of *commitments*. He understands judging and acting as essentially *discursive* activities—that is, as consisting in the application of *concepts*. And he takes concepts to

be *rules*: rules that specify *what* one has committed oneself to, what one has become responsible for, in producing a judgment or an action. They are the rules that govern assessments of the *correctness* of a judgment, in the light of a fact, and of a performance, in the light of an intention. Since one of the tasks of his theoretical concept of conceptual contents is to determine the conditions of correctness of practical performances of judging and acting, Kant is a methodological pragmatist. But his account of discursive practices is couched in a pointedly *normative* idiom.

We owe to Frege the distinction between force and content—and so, as I have been using the terms, the distinction between pragmatics (the study of force) and semantics (the study of content). Claiming, or making a claim, is attaching to or investing in a sentence the fundamental sort of pragmatic force, namely assertional force. Frege understands assertional force in terms of a certain kind of normative assessment. Asserting a sentence is taking it to be *correct* in a specific sense: taking it to be *true*. Frege's most basic objection to psychologistic logicians is that they do not provide the theoretical resources to fund a notion of content that can make sense of the essential dimension of normative assessment that is implicit in attaching assertional force to a sentence. Sentences (or ideas) must for them just matter-of-factly be *there*, like eddies in a stream²⁰, whose occurrence is not intelligible as the making of a claim, the undertaking of a commitment, the adoption of a stance toward the *truth* of the sentence. They cannot show how assessments of sentences as correct or incorrect in the sense of true or false get a grip on them, and hence cannot explain what we are *doing* in making a claim. Since he takes providing the resources to make sense of that notion of pragmatic force to be one of the

central tasks of the theory of content, Frege is a methodological pragmatist. And his understanding of pragmatic force is a *normative* one.

One of Wittgenstein's central preoccupations in the *Philosophical Investigations* is with the norms implicit in linguistic practices. To take an expression, say the 'plus' of arithmetic, to have a determinate meaning is to commit oneself to the correctness of certain ways of applying it, and the incorrectness of others. To understand, or grasp the content of an intention is to know what performances would count as correct according to it, in the sense of fulfilling it. Wittgenstein sees a pair of theoretical perils raised by these implicit practical norms. On the one hand, certain pictures of or ways of thinking about our practices can make this normative dimension seem puzzling, mysterious, or unintelligible. On the other hand, restricting the vocabulary in which we discuss our practice to resolutely nonnormative terms—discussing only regularities and dispositions to move and make noises—renders invisible the very phenomena we discuss under such rubrics as 'meaning', 'understanding', 'assertion', 'belief', and 'intention'.

The later Wittgenstein endorses fundamental pragmatism: the thesis that the attribution of intentional states with contents that can be explicitly stated in the form of propositional 'that'-clauses ('knowing *that*', for short) is intelligible only in the context of the attribution also of practical skills and abilities ('know *how*', for short). In the context of his commitment to a normative pragmatics, this fundamental pragmatism takes a distinctive form: pragmatism about norms, or *normative pragmatism*. For he deploys a version of the sort of regress argument characteristic of fundamental pragmatism to draw the conclusion that norms that are explicit in the form of rules are intelligible only against a background of norms that are implicit in practices. A rule codifies a norm. It makes a distinction between what is correct and what is not correct, according to the norm it

²⁰ [ref.] to the *Posthumous Works* passage

formulates, by *saying* or *describing* what is and is not correct. But understanding a rule, applying the concepts expressed by the words used in its formulation, is itself something that can be done correctly or incorrectly. If explicit rules are the only form that norms can take, then one would need another rule—what Wittgenstein calls an ‘interpretation’ [*Deutung*], a rule for applying a rule—in order for the first rule in fact to distinguish performances that are correct according to that rule from those that are incorrect according to it. That platonist or intellectualist hypothesis about norms accordingly generates a regress that makes the very idea of normative assessment unintelligible. The alternative is to acknowledge that some norms are implicit in practices—in what practitioners actually *do*—rather than explicit in the form of rules that *say* what the norm is. This pragmatism about norms is *normative* fundamental pragmatism.

VIII. Classical Pragmatism

It should not be assumed that commitment to a normative pragmatics is incompatible with pursuing both one’s pragmatic theory and one’s semantic theory in a naturalistic spirit. Normative pragmatics is incompatible with naturalism only in the context of some sort of dualistic understanding of the relation between the normative and the natural. One might accept that the discursive practice to which methodological, semantic, and fundamental pragmatism are addressed must be susceptible to specification in normative terms—that it must make sense to distinguish performances that are correct in various

senses from those that are not, that talk of what one commits oneself to or becomes responsible for by producing a speech act must be in order, and so on—without giving up hope for an ultimately naturalistic account of the applicability of such normative assessments. (Of course, a great deal will turn on what one means by ‘naturalistic’ here. But this is an issue I cannot pursue here.)

I think it is useful to think of the classical American pragmatists as engaged in an enterprise that has this shape. As I read them, they are pragmatists in *all* of the senses I have distinguished so far.²¹ They manifest their endorsement of what I have called ‘fundamental pragmatism’ by giving pride of place to habits, practical skills and abilities, to know-how in a broad sense, and in the way they distinguish themselves from the intellectualist tradition in terms of this explanatory priority. They manifest their endorsement of methodological pragmatism by taking it that the point of our talk about what we mean or believe is to be found in the light it sheds on what we *do*, on our habits, our practices of inquiry, of solving problems and pursuing goals. They manifest their endorsement of semantic pragmatism by taking it that all there is that can be appealed to in explaining the meaning of our utterances and the contents of our beliefs is the role those utterances and beliefs play in our habits and practices.

I also think that the classical American pragmatists endorse a normative pragmatics, and therefore, given their fundamental pragmatism, a normative pragmatism. But this generic commitment is to some degree masked by the specific account they go on to offer of the

²¹ One might question whether James is a linguistic pragmatist. I take it to be pretty clear that Peirce and Dewey are (though one might want to put Peirce in some such broader category as “semiotic pragmatist.”)

norms they see as structuring our broadly cognitive practices. For they, like contemporary rational choice theorists, focus exclusively on *instrumental* norms: assessments of performances as better or worse, correct or incorrect, insofar as they contribute to the agent's success in securing some end or achieving some goal. This is the kind of norm they see as implicit in discursive practice, and (in keeping with their semantic pragmatism) as the ultimate source of specifically semantic dimensions of normative assessment such as truth. They understand truth in terms of usefulness, and take the contents possessed by intentional states and expressed by linguistic utterances to consist in their potential contribution to the success of an agent's practical enterprises. Peirce, James, and Dewey are *instrumental* normative pragmatists. Indeed, they—and their critics—place so much emphasis on this aspect of their approach that both their commitment to a normative pragmatics and the other strands of their pragmatism are in danger of receding from view entirely.

The strategy of understanding how what underwrites various sorts of normative assessment can be implicit in practice in terms ultimately of the success or failure of practical performances to achieve antecedent ends has some conspicuous advantages. Not the least of these is the promise it holds of reconciling the insights that motivate normative pragmatics with a thorough-going naturalism. The instrumental construal of norms allows discursive practice to be seen as norm-laden without appearing mysterious. Since even the beasts of the field have desires, and distinguish between performances that lead to their satisfaction and those that do not, this basic sort of normativity has sound evolutionary credentials. Appeal to the success of practical undertakings is the master

idea the classical pragmatists used to reconcile their kantian appreciation of the essential normativity of discursive practice with their post-Darwinian naturalism.

IX. Three Objections to Instrumental Pragmatism

I said at the outset that I think that the broader version of pragmatism is much more important and interesting than the narrower one. The analytic apparatus that has been put into play so far makes it possible to refine this claim a bit. I think that the constellation of ideas thrown up by the broader pragmatist tradition—methodological pragmatism, semantic pragmatism, fundamental pragmatism, and a normative approach to pragmatics—offers a richer and more promising field for exploration, construction of variants, tinkering, and recombination when considered on its own than it does when supplemented by an instrumental construal of basic practical norms of the sort characteristic of the narrower classical pragmatist tradition. This is far too large a claim for me to try to demonstrate here. Elsewhere I have tried to offer some cash for the positive part of the claim.²² Here I want to indicate at least briefly why I am skeptical about the promise of the instrumental reading of the kind of implicit practical norms that matter for thinking about conceptual content.

The basic idea of classical pragmatism is that one can understand normative assessments of the truth of beliefs as assessments of the extent to which the holding of that belief

²² In *Making It Explicit* (op. cit.).

would contribute to the satisfaction of desires.²³ Beliefs are true insofar as they are good tools or instruments for getting what one wants. Very abstractly, then, the order of explanation proceeds from the satisfaction of desires to the truth of beliefs, and so from the satisfaction conditions of desires to the truth conditions of beliefs. The project of this sort of pragmatism is to elaborate a semantic theory—a theory of the contents of beliefs and claims—based on the pragmatic distinction between a desire’s being satisfied and its not being satisfied.

What is there to recommend an order of explanation that begins with the concept of a desire’s being satisfied, rather than, say, the concept of a belief’s being true? I think the basic idea is that there is a notion of *felt satisfaction* of a desire that can be made sense of prior to any content attributions. Just by being in those states, an animal knows that it itches (just watch it scratch), and again that its itch has been removed (watch it stop scratching). By considering what behavior removed or relieved the motivating state (and what did not, or would not have), one can characterize the itch as a need to be scratched just *there*, and not elsewhere. On that sort of basis, one can then hope to get more complex content attributions off the ground.

How might those content attributions go? Desires motivate behavior, and permit the sorting of behavior into that which does and that which does not satisfy, fulfill, or eliminate the desire. In the context of those desires, beliefs can be imputed as implicit in the behavioral strategies an organism adopts to satisfy them. The beliefs will concern

²³ For present purposes, we need not be concerned with the details of the later steps in the argument that warrant a move from this account of taking-true to an account of truth, and then further to an account of

how things are, and, so, what effects can be expected to ensue from various sorts of performance. The success or failure of those strategies then permits assessment of the truth or falsity of the beliefs—at least when we look at the contribution any one belief would make to the success or failure of a variety of practical enterprises.

This line of thought is not silly; but I believe that it is mistaken and ultimately unworkable. Furthermore, the mistake is of a familiar sort. It depends on commitment to what Sellars called the “Myth of the Given.”²⁴ For the central concept of felt satisfaction is called on to play two roles. On the one hand, one is not supposed to need to have mastered concepts in order to be in this state, and to discriminate it from the state of felt *dissatisfaction* that motivates behavior. On the other hand, being in those states is supposed to count as *knowing* something, in the sense that it provides *evidence* for or against the truth of a belief. Felt satisfaction of a desire, in playing both these roles, is a paradigm of givenness in the sense Sellars insists—rightly, I think—is a myth.

Making out the difference between the states of itching and not itching does not require attributing conceptually articulated content to those states. It is not in that sense an intentional matter at all. This is what makes it tempting to appeal to such a difference as a *point d'appui* outside of and antecedent to intentional interpretation—something that can constrain and shape such interpretation, providing its criteria of adequacy and serving as the ultimate source of evidence for intentional attributions. But when we say, as I did above, that in the context of desires, beliefs can be imputed as implicit in the behavioral

content in terms of conditions of truth in that sense.

²⁴ "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (op. cit.)

strategies an organism adopts to satisfy them, we are thinking of desires as something that has intentional—that is, conceptually articulated—content. For we are thinking of desires as something that can play a role as premises in pieces of practical reasoning such as:

- If*
- i) Sara desires to stay dry (i.e. that she stay dry), and
 - ii) Sara opens her umbrella,

then

- iii) Sara believes that it is raining, and
- iv) Sara believes that if she opens her umbrella, she will
block the rain and stay dry.

Desires of this sort engage inferentially (both evidentially and consequentially) with beliefs. Desires that are capable of playing this sort of role in the imputation of beliefs are quite different from mere itches. They are not an external input to the Davidsonian process of intentional interpretation, but one more element requiring such interpretation. Given actions and desires, we can infer an agent's beliefs by considering what constellations of beliefs and desires would provide practical reasons for those actions. Dually, given actions and beliefs, we can infer an agent's desires. But Davidson is right that desires are in the same boat with beliefs here. Neither of them can be counted as a given in the process of interpretation, even in the relatively weak sense²⁵ in which what the agent actually *does* can be so counted. The idea that there can be one sort of state that can have the properties both of itches and of the conceptually contentful desires that engage with conceptually contentful beliefs in practical reasoning is an episode of the

²⁵ 'Weak' because so much turns on the vocabulary in which one specifies what is done.

Myth of the Given.²⁶ It is perhaps ironic that if this is right, the methodological pragmatists Sellars and Davidson show what is wrong with pragmatism of the classical instrumentalist sort.

One way the difference that matters between things like itches and things like desires emerges concerns the possibility of *mistakes*. The notion of felt satisfaction, of relief from a motivating pressure, includes an element of immediacy as *incorrigibility*. The organism cannot be mistaken about whether its itch has been relieved. But I don't always and automatically know whether I have gotten what I want. The desires that, together with actions, permit the imputation of beliefs are not like that. If I desire to stay dry, or to put the ball through the hoop, to play a good chess game, or to eradicate world poverty, I may in each case mistakenly *think* I have succeeded in satisfying that desire when in fact I have not. For desires of this sort, by contrast with itches, satisfaction of the desire just *is* the truth of a belief: that I am dry, that the ball went through the hoop, that I play a good chess game, that world poverty is eradicated. (One might be tempted to respond that in the case of the itch, relieving it corresponds to the truth of the belief that the desire that is the itch has been satisfied. But this is not in fact analogous, as the need to use a second-order concept such as satisfied in stating the content of the belief shows.)

Even putting aside the issue of givenness by staying resolutely within the realm of intentional interpretation, and ignoring the fallibility of our judgments of success (understood as consisting in the satisfaction of desire), the strategy of defining the truth

²⁶ Dewey, at least, was aware of this distinction, and makes much of it in his writings on value. But I believe that he never thought through its consequences for the foundations of his approach.

of beliefs (and so ultimately their content in the sense of truth *conditions*) by appealing solely to the contribution they make to the success of practical undertakings is hopeless—and it is so for structural reasons. The essentially *inferential* articulation of conceptual content means that it is in principle impossible in general to *isolate* the contribution a belief makes to the success of practical undertakings based on it—again, even bracketing concerns about the inherent circularity of supposing that assessments of success in satisfying a desire can be taken for granted (counted as ‘given’) in advance of knowing anything about the truth of beliefs. For a true belief makes success of a practical undertaking more likely *only* in the absence of substantial relevant collateral *false* belief, *and* the absence of substantial relevant *ignorance*. My true belief that one can tan hides by boiling them together with bits of oak bark will contribute to the satisfaction of my desire for leather only if I have true beliefs about which trees are oak trees. Your false belief that one can tan hides by boiling them together with bits of birch bark will contribute to the satisfaction of a desire for leather in the context of the false belief that what are in fact oak trees are birch trees. A true belief conduces to practical success only in the context of a set of *true* background beliefs. In the context of the sort of semantic program pursued by the classical pragmatists, there is no noncircular way to state or eliminate this condition. And without that, it simply is not true that having a true belief about some particular topic is more likely to lead to satisfactory results than having a false one. And ignorance can be as corrosive in this context as actual error. My true belief that I find my way better in the light than in the dark and my true belief that I can produce light by striking a match will not help me satisfy my desire to find my way safely out of the room I am in if I am unaware that it is filled with an explosive vapor.

The attempt to impute truth and truth conditions to beliefs on the basis of their role in practical reasoning that does, and practical reasoning that does not result in success in the sense of satisfaction of desires fails not only because of the *circularity* of appealing to satisfaction of desires in this context (tempting because of the mistaken assimilation of desires to itches), but also because of the intractability of the problem of *isolating* the contribution of individual beliefs to such success or failure.²⁷

For these reasons, I think an *instrumental* construal of the norms implicit in discursive practice will not support the project of fundamental semantic pragmatism. So although I take it that there is a lot to be said for the broad pragmatism that project epitomizes, I reject pragmatism in the narrower sense of which the classical American pragmatists are the paradigmatic proponents. Happily, there is another way to understand the norms implicit in discursive practice, besides the instrumental. Implicit conceptual commitments can be understood as *social statuses*, instituted by the practical attitudes of participants in an essentially *social* linguistic practice. It is on that basis of a working-out of that idea that I pursue the project of semantic and fundamental pragmatism in *Making It Explicit*—but I won't say anything more about it here.

²⁷ I discuss the application of this thought to a sophisticated contemporary version of the pragmatic idea in "Unsuccessful Semantics" *Analysis* Vol. 54 No. 3 (July 1994) pp. 175–8.

X. The Language-as-Tool Metaphor

Instead, I would like to close by considering briefly a more global sort of instrumentalism about discursive practice. Classical pragmatism, as I have presented its basic ideas here, is a local instrumentalism, in that it considers possession of each particular concept, mastery of each particular word, and adoption of each particular belief as means for securing antecedent ends generally. The classical pragmatists pursue the project of semantic pragmatism by seeking to derive the content of particular concepts and beliefs from the role that they play in the pursuit of a variety of independently specifiable goals. That functional role is a matter of the instrumental difference the concept or belief in question makes in the context of a constellation of other concepts and beliefs already in play as a background. This last feature is the origin of the *isolation objection* to the feasibility of this sort of local instrumentalism as a means for achieving the end of semantic pragmatism.

It is possible to think of discursive practice as a whole as being *for* something. Thus Locke understands language itself as a tool for the expression of thought. In this regard he epitomizes the entire early Modern tradition, which takes linguistic expressions generally to be instruments for the communication to others of ideas that are what they are antecedently to and independently of their relation to the means of expressing them. This view is something like the converse of linguistic pragmatism. I don't find this approach attractive²⁸, but it is not my current target.

For there is another fairly widespread way of thinking of discursive practice as a whole in instrumental terms. One can understand language and thought as a tool, not for communication, but

²⁸ *Making It Explicit* consists (among other things) of an extended argument for linguistic pragmatism of a broadly Davidsonian sort. In outline, it goes something like this: Conceptual content is unintelligible as such except as involving a representational dimension. But when that representational dimension of semantic content is properly understood, it is seen to be a function of the *social* perspectival character of

for the securing of any ends whatsoever. Classical pragmatism sought to assess individual concepts and beliefs in terms of their utility in pursuing ends in general. The sort of global discursive instrumentalism I want to address puts discursive practice in a box with tools, and sees its point as consisting in its utility as a means for getting what we want. The language-as-tool trope unites figures otherwise as diverse (in spite of their shared fundamental pragmatism) as the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. I want to close by arguing that the idea that we can understand language by understanding what it is *for*—in particular that it is for pursuing antecedently intelligible ends—is confused and wrongheaded.

I do not mean to say that everything about the language-as-tool metaphor is bad or misleading. There are a number of important points it can be used to make. I would include among these at least the following:

- a) If we understand grasp of a concept as mastery of the use of a word, then we should acknowledge that those uses are quite varied. They do not all have the same point—do not all answer to the same sort of norms. One way of talking about the very different roles they play is to talk about the ‘jobs’ they perform. Indeed, talk about their ‘point’, their ‘role’, their ‘job’ are all ways of talking about their use in broadly instrumental terms. Thus words such as ‘the’, ‘not’, ‘somewhat’, ‘tall’, ‘cat’, ‘imaginary’, ‘aches’, and so on are used in *quite* different ways. Being reminded of how different the use of tools such as a wrench, glue, a straightedge, and a level are can be helpful in reminding ourselves of this. (Notice

the *inferential* articulation of deontic statuses. And that amounts to requiring specifically *linguistic* practice for conceptual content.

- for instance that a tape-measure has a different ‘direction of fit’ from a hammer, and that a level can work either way.) This is a point to which we can easily be blinded by a picture—for instance the nominalist representationalist picture that structured the classical semantic tradition, according to which words should be thought of as names of things (compare: signifiers/signifieds). The purposes that can be served by tools are many and various, and so are the uses to which words can be put.²⁹ We might call this the “*motley*” point.
- b) Often the use of one tool makes sense or is possible only in connection with the use of others: nuts, bolts, and wrenches (and possibly drills) all depend on one another, as do screws and screw drivers, nails and hammers. These “equipmental involvements” (as Heidegger calls them) are at least as essential to the functioning of the equipment as are their reference to other things (e.g. relatively flat objects that we might want to fasten together). We might call this *the “holism” point*.
- c) The language-as-tool metaphor might also be a way of introducing the idea of a normative pragmatics. For it brings into play the idea that the use of a tool to perform a task induces a dimension of *normative assessment*. Uses can be assessed as more or less successful, and so tools can be assessed as more or less adequate or apt for the task in question, and their deployment as more or less skillful. We might call this the “*normative*” point.
- d) Such assessment will not typically be all-or-none; it is more typically a more-or-less affair. Thinking of the application of concepts this way will start us off with access to a sense in which a concept such as Newtonian mass can give us a cognitive grip on things (slipperier or firmer, in various circumstances). This

²⁹ Though it does *not* follow that a good way to think about those uses is as serving purposes!

- contrasts with the puzzlement we have when we realize that since, strictly, there is no such thing as Newtonian mass, all claims in which it essentially occurs are false. Once again, the representationalist paradigm is liable to mislead here about normative assessment. (Even thinking about this in terms of ‘approximation’ is wrong, since still in the space in which *exactness* is possible. But that is just not how the use of all concepts works.) We might call this *the “more-or-less” point*.
- e) Again, the assessment of success and aptness may be seriously *multidimensional*: one can succeed fully in some respects, partly in others, and not at all in still others. We might call this *the “multidimensionality” point*.

The motley point, the holism point, the normative point, the more-or-less point, and the multidimensionality point all provide good reasons to be attracted to the language-as-tool metaphor. So what’s wrong with it? What I object to is the idea that language as a whole is to be understood in terms of its being *for* something, in terms of its *point* being to serve as a means for the pursuit of ends. Now of course typically the thought is not that there is some *particular* set of ends that language should be seen as in aid of. (Although some reductive evolutionary accounts come close to putting the reproductive success of the species in this role.) It is rather that language can be thought of as a tool for pursuing whatever goals we might find ourselves with. I think this idea gets the essence of the linguistic precisely backwards. What is wrong about it is that making something intelligible as a tool is exhibiting it as a means to an end *that can be grasped or specified independently of consideration of that means*. Our antecedent grasp of the goal or purpose then provides the basis for normative assessments of success and failure of the

tool, and so for comparison of various alternative means to that same end. My claim is that it is a mistake to seek to make discursive practice as a whole intelligible on this model.

The reason is straightforward. Though linguistic practice does, to be sure, help us in pursuing our ends, the vast majority of those ends are ones we could not so much as *entertain*, never mind secure, apart from our participation in linguistic practice. Most of the things we want to do we can only even *want* to do because we can talk. The very intelligibility of the ends depends on our linguistic capacities. They are precisely *not* goals we can make sense of *first*, so that later, language can be brought into the picture playing the role of a possible tool for achieving them—as fastening two pieces of wood firmly together *can* be made sense of in advance of considering nails-and-hammers, screws-and-drivers, glue, clamps, and so on.

In fact, insofar as it makes sense to talk about language as *for* anything, what it *is* ‘for’ is making intelligible and accessible the possibility of *novel* ends. One of the founding insights on which Chomsky erected the edifice of contemporary linguistics is the observation that almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is a novel one—not just novel in the sense that that speaker has never before heard or uttered that very sequence of words, but novel in the far stronger sense that *no-one* has ever before heard or uttered it. Linguistic know how is essentially productive and creative, in the sense that the skilled linguistic practitioner can produce and understand an indefinite number of novel sentences, and that the core of linguistic practice consists in the exercise of that

capacity. Participants in such a practice are bound by norms governing the use of familiar words: not just any use is appropriate. They accordingly surrender some negative freedom—freedom *from* constraint by such norms. But in return they are richly rewarded with positive freedom—freedom *to* do things they could never otherwise do or contemplate doing. For the novel, though norm-governed, rearrangements of those familiar words express candidate beliefs, desires, and intentions available for adoption or rejection by speakers and their audiences.

And this, if anything, is what language is ‘for’. Only by its ‘means’ can one deny that for every tree there is another that is taller, or wonder whether it is always possible to do what one ought to do, or decide to devote one’s life to relieving poverty. The essence of specifically discursive practice—the practice of deploying *concepts*—is precisely its engendering of this capacity to entertain an indefinite number of novel beliefs, and to frame an indefinite number of novel ends. Thinking of discursive practice itself in instrumental terms obscures just this defining feature of it. Of course, one can still use instrumental formulae—saying, as I just did, something to the effect that the aim, goal, or purpose served by language is to make possible the envisaging and endorsing of new aims, goals, or purposes. But this is a misleading way of describing the situation. For the particular sort of intelligibility promised by exhibiting something as a means to an end depends on the end being specifiable antecedently to consideration of possible means for pursuing or securing it, on the in-principle possibility of alternative means to that same end, and on the availability of means of assessment of the success in achieving the goal that is independent of the means employed. The case in point satisfies *none* of those

conditions of instrumental intelligibility. For this reason, I think one ought to reject the global form of instrumental pragmatism, as well as the local one.³⁰

XI. Conclusion

I have tried to sketch the elements of a broad tradition of pragmatism about the discursive, and to distinguish it from the narrower instrumental pragmatism notoriously associated with the classical American pragmatists. I have not attempted to argue for the commitments encapsulated in methodological, semantic, fundamental, and linguistic pragmatism—merely to delineate them. I have tried to say why I think conjoining the instrumental variety of pragmatism with these other thoughts makes them less, rather than more promising.

END

³⁰ Accordingly, I find a major tension in Rorty's thought, between his robust appreciation of the transformative potential of new vocabularies and his continued appeal to instrumental models for thinking and talking about them.