WORLDS OF TRUTH

A Philosophy of Knowledge

Israel Scheffler

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This work is not a textbook but a treatise, explaining and building on my work in different areas of philosophy over the past half century. I have wanted, in this book, to accomplish two main purposes: first, to draw attention to the common themes and organizing emphases implicit in the analyses I have undertaken, in this way providing a sense of my philosophical directions throughout, and second, to affirm certain new convictions to which they have led me.

To this end, I have had perforce to restate and often to reformulate several of my prior results, fitting them into a general framework along with new analyses, to articulate the philosophical pattern which characterizes my views. I hope the reader will forgive such necessary repetitions, bearing in mind the larger context they are meant to serve here.

My book thus gives a sense of my organizing themes and also offers an account of fundamental conclusions to which my recent thinking has driven me, my epistemological sympathies being pragmatic, my methodological practice analytic. The result is an overview of my philosophy of knowledge, encompassing an approach to aspects of epistemology, of truth, and of metaphysics. The following paragraphs explain the structure of the whole.

The Introduction provides an overall sketch of my philosophical orientation.

The main part of the book (Part I) is divided into three chapters, the first devoted to the topic of justification, the second to the topic of truth, and the last to the topic of worlds. Three succeeding chapters (Part II) illustrate and elaborate the treatment of certain central themes of the book.

The first main chapter, “Justification” (Chapter 1), addresses epistemological issues, concerning how truths are chosen. Here I argue against linear
approaches to justification and advocate interactionism instead, an approach in which the warrant of our assertions is diffused throughout the whole mass of our beliefs rather than concentrated in a single locus thought to be guaranteed by certainty or decided by fiat.

The second, “Truth” (Chapter 2), offers a transition from epistemology to reference, passing from a concern with how truths are acquired to what they affirm: Here, I take up the cudgels for absolute truth, a presently unpopular notion mistakenly thought to have been displaced by science and overcome by verificationalism or deconstruction. I firmly disentangle absolute truth from absolutism, emphasizing linguistic and systematic relativity, and eschewing certainty.

The third, “Worlds” (Chapter 3), deals with metaphysical topics. Here I consider philosophical debates between monists and versionsal pluralists, and, rejecting both these schools of thought, I come out in favor of what I designate as plurealism, the doctrine that there are many real worlds—not either none, as irrealism claims, or exactly one, as physicalists claim. We live, I hold, in several worlds, made known to us through scientific methods, yielding a variety of truth clusters not reducible to one. A theory of everything is a fairy tale mirage, science having two moments, the one reductive, pursuing economy, the other expansive, ever seeking new realms to explore and cultivate.

Part II of the book, “Related Pragmatic Themes,” rounds out the portrait of my philosophy of knowledge.

Chapter 4 relates my pragmatic orientation to its classical source in Peirce, emphasizing his critique of Descartes, his anti-foundationalism, and his understanding of science.

Chapter 5 offers one attempt to apply my interactional view of justification not only to science but also to ethics.

Chapter 6 relates understanding to the emotions, whether in science, philosophy, or art, thus exemplifying the pragmatic emphasis on connecting theory and practice.
Acknowledgments

The scholarly debts I have incurred over the past half century are beyond enumeration. I must, however, here express my enduring gratitude to philosophical teachers from whom I have learned, and continue to learn—to Nelson Goodman, Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, C. G. Hempel, W. V. Quine, and Morton White—as well as to colleagues and friends who have furthered my education to the present day—to Catherine Z. Elgin, Sidney Morgenbesser, Hilary Putnam, Robert Schwartz, David Sidorsky, and Harvey Siegel.

I am fortunate to have spent five decades of my academic career at Harvard, as a Professor of Philosophy and Education, and the last five years at Brandeis, as Scholar-in-Residence at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, both institutions having provided me with unparalleled intellectual environments, unstinting support, and warm collegueship.

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Introduction

Inquiry, in every case, reaches out to the new; the quest for certainty is the quest for an end to inquiry.* Rejecting this quest shapes a distinctive epistemological attitude—one that is prominent in the pages to follow. Such attitude, increasingly prevalent in much recent thought, has, however, also been typically partial, marking off one or another favored realm, notably that of meaning, science, ethics, or philosophy, where certainty continues to hold sway. I here adopt no such favoritism.

In related nominalistic spirit, I reject reliance on presumed necessities, whether natural or linguistic, as fundamentally unclear, and I abjure the notions of analyticity and synonymy as well. Accordingly, the quest for a certainty based upon meaning is abandoned.¹

Nor is there any room for certainty in my conception of science, often claimed to rest on a hard core of the sensory given. Evidence, argument, test, and probability are obvious touchstones in science, but none is founded on an array of immutable sensory judgments. Although observation may indeed dislodge theory, theory may also overrule observation, and one observation may conflict with another. Observation relates to theory not as the certain to the probable but rather as the particular to the general. Clashing with theory, an independently credible observation report may provoke a re-equilibration of belief, but the resulting system may as well exclude as well as include such reports.

The foundational view of knowledge as a superstructure reared upon a rock-solid base is thus opposed, along with the obverse doctrine of pure coherence. If science is not an airy fantasy, neither is it an edifice resting upon basic beliefs beyond the threat of change. A better image of science

is that suggested by Charles Sanders Peirce, of a cable made of many interwoven fibers and stronger than any of these, none of which is indispensable. Alternatively, a more recent suggestion of Karl R. Popper compares science to a house built on stilts over a swamp, and Otto Neurath likens science to a ship being continually rebuilt upon the open sea. To analyze the anti-foundational spirit of science while affirming its credibility is the task of scientific justification in my view.

Because the pattern of such justification applies not only to science but also to ethics, I grant no safe haven for certainty in the latter realm either. No act or belief is an island. Each has systematic ramifications. Each can survive only within a changing community of surrounding acts or beliefs, whose claims demand equal consideration even if they do not uniformly carry equal weight. Such a picture does not, of course, imply that no act or belief is durable or stable. It implies only that stability is not a self-evident privilege or entitlement but rather an achievement, to be reconciled with the demands of continuing systematization.

The epistemological attitude I have characterized extends also to philosophy, which, no more than the realms of meaning, science, or ethics, gives sanctuary to certainty. Philosophy has no direct access to higher realities, firmer principles, or keener insights than are available elsewhere. As I view it, philosophy is systematic interpretation and deliberation. Reflecting upon prior belief and practice, it analyzes, questions, criticizes, and systematizes, thus modifying the initial objects of its attention.

It begins, not at the beginning with a clean slate, but in the middle and after the fact. As Peirce put it in his critique of Descartes’ method, “We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy.” Whatever illumination philosophy may yield is an outcome of its work upon such prejudices rather than a consequence of its transcendent certainties projected upon a vacant field.

Philosophy stands, not outside the sphere of common thought and experience but squarely within it. It carries no epistemological immunity to the common ills and distempers of inquiry. Logic, evidence, clarity, system, truth—all make their demands of philosophy no less than of other domains of the intellect and, where philosophers fall short, they can offer no special excuse. What is distinctive about philosophy is not its certainty but its comprehensive curiosity, not its infallibility but its interest in understanding every sphere of thought and life. If philosophy is not self-sufficient, however, neither is it powerless. It presupposes, but also reworks,
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the pre-philosophical matter from which it sets out. Like science, from which it cannot be sharply distinguished, it may yield novelty and reveal the unseen.

Like science too, it is pluralistic, and in three main senses. First, its problems are plural, drawn from any region whatever of human interest or conviction. Second, its concepts are not pre-ordained; they need to be devised or chosen out of an infinite array of alternatives. Third, its solutions are not uniquely related to the problems they address. For any systematic interpretation preserving the preferred truths of some object domain, there will be incompatible others that do the same. Yet, to provide any adequate interpretation, in philosophy no less than in science, is a significant feat; pluralism is not nihilism. An adequate interpretation is a triumph of insight and order available to all—hence an instance of intellectual progress.

Such progress of the understanding is not limited in its import to the understanding. It colors our feelings, memories, perceptions, anticipations, and actions. Philosophy is no more a spectator sport than is science or art. Its analyses modify habits; its techniques channel visions; its visions organize sentiments and orient conduct. Such connectivity of theory and practice, affirmed by pragmatism, rings true to me and inclines me toward that philosophy—in its broad outlines at least, and despite my criticisms, elsewhere, of certain of its specific formulations.

There are, of course, variant readings of pragmatism, as of every philosophical movement, and some are too soft for my taste. That philosophy is social does not mean it is merely social; that it comments on culture does not imply it is only cultural commentary. Philosophy converses, but is not swallowed up in conversation. If its starting points are not fixed and its paths and destinations are plural, yet it traverses a hard terrain imposing a severe discipline. No more than science can it simply will its conclusions. No less than science does it strive for objectivity relative to independent constraints, variable as these may be. Objectivity without certainty, relativity but not subjectivism, truth consistent with pluralism—these are the pragmatic emphases I admire.

It follows that I see no rift between pragmatism and analytic methods in philosophy. Without argument and analysis, pragmatism is mere attitude, not philosophy proper. As I read the great American pragmatists, they came not to bury philosophical analysis but to apply it to novel effect over a wide range of contemporary problems. Nor can current analyses, of whatever school, be enclosed within a small circle of technical concerns.