

Knowledge First? Why not?

Claudine Tiercelin. Institut Universitaire de France, Institut Jean Nicod, University Paris 12
[Edinburgh, September 30. 2009]

1. Knowledge as inquiry: General merits and limits of a virtue-theoretic and pragmatist approach.

1. *The merits*: 1) a dynamic view of knowledge modelled as the process which takes you from one state of belief to another state of belief (cf Peirce, Dewey): it is more important to view knowledge not as states of beliefs but as mental agents' states, as inquirers engaged in practices of epistemic evaluation (links between knowledge and mental and epistemic agency (importance of looking at the etiology of our mental states, how the person formed her beliefs) and also with action (hence deliberation is both theoretical and practical). 2) the use made of belief not only through aristotelian lenses but through Peircian lenses (insisting on the indeterminacy of habit as much as on its stability or rigidity); 3) the importance of situating knowledge within the semantics of assertion (cf. Peirce; Hookway); 4) the insistence on sentiment as being part of and not opposed to rationality (Peirce; James, Hookway); 5) The recognition of the metacognitive level: hence a reinforcement of the classical (though forgotten) links to be drawn between epistemology with ethics (as all pragmatists also do: what counts for investigation counts for ethical investigation too (Dewey; Putnam, tiercelin)), but also with the philosophy of mind (cf. Williamson), and also with cognitive science (works on metacognition (Proust)).

2. *The limits*.: 1) it is not because knowledge is inquiry that it is *all* there is to knowledge or that justification is no longer important. 2) Inquiry viewed as a question- answer process: indeed, but inquiry for a pragmatist has a scientific, experimental outlook (Peirce: to pass from a state of dissatisfied belief to a state of satisfactory belief, as the result of genuine doubts prompted by a shock with a recalcitrant experience encountered with the real (and not due to mere changes in affective states, or "feeling"; 3) Inquiry implies more than deliberation and discussion (otherwise close to Habermasian ethics of discussion: it requires methods of inquiry (deduction, induction, abduction): more than mere recommendations (Peirce *contra* Hookway and Putnam). 4) Even the attention lent to the semantics of assertions tends to underestimate the fact that if context counts, assertion is mostly viewed as a strong commitment liable to penalties (Peirce): because when we assert something, we aim at knowledge and truth: this is why inquiry *aims at* assertion.; 5) Ethics of inquiry indeed: but it is not sure that it dispenses us with an "ethics of belief". Hence, different positions among pragmatists about the relations between what counts as an epistemic justification and an ethical justification (cf Clifford-James debate. S. Haack): important differences here between James and Peirce who remains fundamentally on the side of the evidentialist. Illustrations of this in Hookway's diagnosis of the best responses to scepticism, more in keeping with a kind of neo-pyrrhonian or (Wittgensteinian) outlook than with a Peircian (or critical commonsensist) approach: for ex. Hookway's approach is a description of our practices: is it enough in order to get the right type of epistemic normativity we are looking for? (Risk of "psychologism" of epistemology).

2. Knowledge as the aim of inquiry : A new pragmaticist strategy.

The "pragmaticist strategy" starts from a standard rather than virtue theoretic approach: rather than necessary and sufficient conditions, it proposes some "constraints" on knowledge, which may be identified along the following lines:

(K) *S knows that P iff:*

a) S believes that P (belief being less an *internal* mental state than a *disposition* to action)(A. Bain, Peirce, Ramsey).
b) P is true (truth being itself conceived either on the mode of warranted assertibility(Dewey), at the ideal limit of inquiry (Peirce), or in a merely redundantist fashion (Ramsey): truth as success; truth in itself is metaphysically neutral; what counts is what goes together with it: our assertions. our investigations

c) S is (most often: because of the ever present risk of fallibilism) justified in believing that P, namely, essentially, that:

1. "S would believe that P iff P were true" (E. Sosa's principle of safety ; Reidian, Peircian, neo-Moorean principle of commonsense).

2. If P were not true in relevant circumstances, S would not believe P (principle of "sensitivity"); in case our until now best established beliefs encountered the shock of recalcitrant experience, then we should be ready to "overthrow our whole cartload of beliefs "(Peirce's *critical* commensism).

3. If, in other relevant circumstances, P were still true, S would still believe that P ("counterfactual" conditions formulated by Nozick) translatable into the lessons to be drawn from the pragmatist maxim, along a subjunctive conditional reading: in order to get the meaning of the hardness of the diamond, one can always translate it into a set of conditionals : "if the diamond was pressed upon, it *would* not break" (reality of the "would-be" or disposition).

4. S is justified in believing that P by a *proper reliable causal process* (Goldman: hence, irrelevant counterfactual situations are excluded), the reliability of the process being itself a matter of *trust* on our part in our cognitive (intellective and active) faculties (Reid, Peirce, Sosa, Greco).

But to those conditions, two other, more specifically pragmatist, principles should be added:

1) *The refusal of the principle of radical generality*, which goes hand in hand with the sceptical argument : as a consequence, a) an analysis is required of the conditions of possibility of doubt itself (and not merely of knowledge; "doubt itself needs to be justified". cf. Reid, Peirce and Wittgenstein : we should find a way to distinguish between paper (or chamber) doubt and genuine reasons for doubt ; rely either on certain rules or norms (hinge propositions in Wittgenstein's style) or on principles (closer to Common Sense), but constantly submit such principles - which, incidentally, are not fixed (Reid) but evolutive ("we outgrow the applicability of instinct". Peirce), to criticism) – to our criticism and control; and show that the

sceptical objections are most often strong because they refuse any kind of *contextualization*. However, invoking contextualism does not amount to hold that the epistemic status of a proposition may *vary* according to purely conversational, cultural social (or other) factors: it is to hold that, independently of such influences, a proposition has no *epistemic status* whatsoever. Thus formulated, contextualism implies a form of externalism, for even if proper contextual constraints have to be satisfied in order for such and such a proposition to be able to claim any knowledge, such constraints need not be actually *claimed*, *known*, nor even *believed*, even if some minimal sensitivity to such constraints (because of their causal impact) is unavoidable (Williamson). In that respect, a pragmatist refuses the irrelevant choice - due to an erroneous split (according to him) between the internal *and* the external- between internalism and externalism. In particular, not to accept the principle of a privileged access to our mental states (access-internalism), through some form of conscious awareness, intuition, introspection, does not imply that we cannot (in fact we must) exercise some self-control and criticism on our beliefs: the question remains open as to the nature of such a control: is it something irreducibly normative and reflexive, or is such a normativity already present in terms of some metacognitive capacities at the level of nature itself? In which case, we would not have to distinguish a "reflexive" level from an "animal" level (Sosa) in order to have a "perspective" on our beliefs, but we should merely view epistemic normativity as being in continuity (emerging from) with nature (Peirce's solution). But then, we would have to view our belief-dispositions not only as *stable* habits but as involving the necessary "habit-changes" - Peirce. cf Aristotle's distinction between "hexis" (stable habit) and "diathesis" (moving disposition)- entailed by the *education* of our "feelings of knowing" or "sentiment of rationality" (James, Peirce) in order for our dispositions to *become* virtues, hence to play their expected role in our practices of epistemic *evaluations* and ethical *valuings* (cf. Dewey's distinction, which we have to make if we want to keep the insight that there is *more* value in knowledge than in justified true beliefs). In the same manner, not to accept the principle of an *independent* reality, totally external to our beliefs (criticism of metaphysical realism: Peirce, Putnam) does not imply that it is not possible (indeed it is necessary, if we want to explain the cooperation of the (truth-maker) world with our beliefs: 1) either to maintain the *causal* strength of reality upon our beliefs (Peirce's secondness and semiotic *abductive* realism applied to the analysis of perception and opposed to a Reidian direct realistic or a Putnamian natural realistic approach), 2) or to develop a form of realism enabling one to explain how, a) the real does *constrain* our beliefs, and both b) be viewed as the final opinion agreed upon by the scientific community (hence justify our scientific method of fixing our beliefs in a warranted way (Peirce's scholastic and even Scotistic realism) .

2. **The principle of fallibilism** which is closely allied with the presumption of the possibility of knowledge but also with a necessarily un-dogmatic definition of knowledge and an epistemic (and even ontological) radical indeterminism. But it is a fallibilism which may itself happen to be questioned, and is constantly submitted to the rules of scientific method and to the constraints of inquiry. But note that it is precisely such a fallibilism (which is consubstantial to pragmatism) which constitutes the ever present risk of the sceptical drift (several times, indeed, the pragmatists come very close to scepticism, in a neo-Pyrrhonian or dogmatic way). Contrary to Hookway's (2008) suggestion that "fallibilism" is not really "disturbing" for Peirce, since it has the status of a mere "abstract" possibility, such an alliance of "fallibilism and anti-scepticism" constitutes "the" insight of American pragmatism (Putnam), but also a genuine threat to knowledge. This is why it seems advisable to bet on some form of weak *foundationalism* which might be looked for, along such lines as those proposed by Tyler Burge's concept of "perceptual entitlement": our perceptions may not provide us warrants nor justifications, however they entitle us or give us *prima facie* justifications to believe what we do believe.

3. Knowledge naturalized?

Three major characteristics of the approach

1. Such a pragmatist strategy does not subscribe to an answer in terms of a "naturalization" of epistemology (Quine): Quine holds that the question of the definition and of the justification of knowledge needs not be raised and that the only things that should be studied by epistemology pertain to the field of causal (neuronal, biological) transactions between the organism and its environment. For the same reason, Quine rejects sceptical doubts: sceptical doubts are mere scientific doubts. On the contrary, such a position as Quine's is unable to account for the *normative* aspect of knowledge (and, more generally, of rationality (Kim, Putnam)), or for the fact that knowledge relies on beliefs (in a way the pragmatists were alone in measuring all the complexity, underlining as they did, both its natural and logical as well as its normative aspects).

2. Although basically naturalistic (endorsing reliabilism and externalism), it should be distinguished not only from the strategy which has been defended by many epistemologists and philosophers of cognitive science based on the mere reliability of our cognitive processes (A. Goldman), or even by more sophisticated virtue theoretic approaches in terms of agent reliabilism (Greco). However, the pragmatist "parry" involves some contextualist components (although knowledge does not *depend* on the context of the questions being raised about it (contra Stanley, Hookway, Greco, and all kinds of pragmatic encroachers); it involves a strong externalist component allowing the notion of "margins of error" (T. Williamson), a strong evidential component and both a fallibilistic and realistic component (Reid, Peirce).

3. A well understood naturalism must take the sceptical challenge seriously and try to provide an answer to it: in other words, I reject the diagnosis made and the attitude recommended by Stanley Cavell for whom the "truth" of scepticism consists in making clear that our relation to the world is not a relation of *knowledge*, and as a consequence, one should return to a philosophy of the "common", the "trite", or the "ordinary" and simply forget epistemology (or philosophy itself). Neither does either a mere "common-sense" type of rejection (scepticism is "absurd", un-ordinary, un-practical, rhetorical) suffice.

4. There is no other possible answer to the sceptical challenge than a naturalistic one, but it is a form of naturalism which is very different from Quine's, for example, and much more inspired by Thomas Reid and Peirce's pragmatist theory of critical common sense, which attempts to explain, in particular, how the norms *emerge* from nature, and establishes narrow links between knowledge, belief and action, hence, between the "intellective" faculties and the "active faculties" (Reid) of man.

4. Concluding remarks: The implications and merits of such an approach

a) Tools against scepticism within a basically naturalistic framework: Necessity to take the sceptical challenge (in all its dimensions) seriously, but also to revise the supposed “strength” of the sceptical claims (Peirce, Wittgenstein, Williamson). Three basic answers until now have been provided:

1) A form of “naturalistic” scepticism, of a neo-human type (Strawson, Stroud) : scepticism is “conditionally” correct, as the unavoidable result of any inquiry aiming at knowledge and implies, as a consequence, a break between philosophy and ordinary life(Stroud).It is irrefutable; if we do not admit this, it is only because, psychologically (naturalistic answer), we are unable to do so, even if (attenuated pessimism), it remains ineffective in ordinary life(Strawson). But the essential point (its theoretical unshakability) is nonetheless taken for granted.

2) A form of neo-Pyrrhonism (Fogelin): one still views scepticism as a genuine problem and agrees that an inquiry into justification and knowledge is well founded, but, following Aenesideme’s and Agrippa’s dialectical techniques, (reinterpreted in the light of the teachings of the linguistic turn), one adopts an attitude of Wittgensteinian inspiration: justification is based on *non epistemic* norms (the “hinges” which allow the door to turn). No (coherentist or reliabilist) analysis avoids the vices of circularity, dogmatic end, or infinite regress.

3) A form of answer (more inspired by the kind of probabilism of a Carneades), close to common sense, one of the main inspirers of which is E.G. Moore, but which is also the heir of the Scottish (Reidian) philosophy of common sense, and which can also, to a certain extent, get its inspiration from Wittgenstein (interpreted, this time, more as a “pragmatist” than as a “Pyrrhonian” (cf. M. Williams, H. Putnam) : extreme scepticism is taken as unreasonable, in so far as it bets on the overall presence of the risk of error, and leads to agnology (or theory of ignorance, P. Unger) ; the reality of the risk is recognized (fallibilism), but a theory of justification without any warrant of truth is defended, which, however, enables less to “refute” than to “neutralize” the sceptic.

b) a non reductionist account of knowledge within a naturalistic framework: Although it remains within a basically standard model, it insists on the necessary revision of some of our views about epistemology and knowledge. The new picture involves: a naturalistic though not “naturalized” (Quine) approach; brings epistemology closer to ethics; stresses the needs to interpret normative facts (without totally indulging into virtue epistemology); accounts for normativity, in terms of an emergence of norms (viewed as both stable and evolutionary dispositions (habits *and* habit-changes) from nature (akin to Kant’s model of a system of preformation of pure reason), brings epistemology back to philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology: accounts for such mental states as not only belief-dispositions but also affective states as being constitutive of mental agency and epistemic agency; brings epistemology closer to the philosophy of science: insists on experience and experimentation within the context of an inquiry ruled by the scientific method ; brings epistemology closer to the philosophy of language: the inquiry part of knowledge stresses the dynamic of a question-answer process and insists on the responsibility of our commitments: knowledge aims at assertion within a pragmatist though limited contextualism ;brings epistemology close to metaphysics, through the need for a better understanding of the *nature* of dispositions (are they mental, physical, basic, supervenient on categorical properties, merely functional) and of the real (if perceptual entitlement may be viewed as a *prima facie* justification, constraining our beliefs, “mimicking foundationalism”, how does perception hook into the world, in what way does it inform us about the ontological furniture of the states of affairs?)

c) A decidedly anti-pyrrhonian model of agency and a guide to action : (ethical refusal of neutrality or abstention; cf James). Some Morals: This morning, when we woke up, we stopped dreaming (at least, we are *entitled* to believe so). The sun, as yesterday had arisen, the earth was under our feet. This is not *infallibly* certain, but it remains *highly probable*, until proven contrary. At any rate, it would be *meaningless* to ask us to *justify* it or to pretend that we are in no way *entitled* to think it. Because we *aim at truth*, because we value knowledge more than mere justified and true belief, because we view ourselves as answerable and responsible (epistemic and mental) agents who are constrained by the real and commit themselves to their assertions, we presume (not only as a *regulative* but as a *living* hope) that knowledge is possible, and this is indeed sufficient to *dispose* us to *act*.