

**ROBERT SCHWARTZ, *PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES:
CONSTRUCTIVISM BEYOND TRUTH AND REALISM***¹
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Robert Schwartz has gathered together a number of papers he has published over the years that deal with the issues of inquiry, truth, constructivism, normativity, and perception. The common theme of these papers, as the title of the work indicates, is that Schwartz addresses the topics from a pragmatist point of view. The essays are uniformly interesting and useful, two good reasons to recommend the book to any interested reader.

Schwartz deals with his themes with an analytic philosopher in mind, though he does so in ways that are a bit unusual and, I would say, successful. The first relevant point is that unlike many contemporary analytic philosophers who are interested in pragmatism, Schwartz draws not on recent debates in what is sometimes called 'analytic pragmatism', but on the classical pragmatists, primarily James and Dewey, but Peirce as well. His intent is to demonstrate 1) that much of the standard criticisms of the classical pragmatists, from Russell et al. to the present, have misunderstood the pragmatists' positions and arguments, 2) that the classical pragmatists themselves, or someone like himself who is thinking in their terms, can handle the criticisms even when they are more carefully stated, and 3) that classical pragmatism already had the conceptual resources to address satisfactorily many of the issues that still bedevil analytic philosophers. Schwartz accomplishes these ends admirably, though I am a sympathetic reader and predisposed to agree with him. One might wonder at various points how a less sympathetic, analytically inclined reader might respond, and one would get a sense of how Schwartz might handle such responses because at various points his own analysis takes the form of responses to objections that he has received along the way. It all makes for a philosophically satisfying read.

Another reason the book is worth reading and can

be recommended without hesitation is the way it is written. I was once told by a Polish friend and colleague that a book of mine that was recently published was, and I paraphrase a bit, a good book but would never be popular in Poland because it was too clearly written. I apologize to Polish philosophers if this attribution to them of a predilection for obscurity is misplaced, but if my friend's comment was accurate, then Schwartz's book will have no chance in Poland because it is written clearly, without philosophical jargon, and the analyses are organized such that the reader can follow and appreciate them without difficulty or confusion. Again, I am admittedly a sympathetic reader, but in the end it all seems like sweet reason, and that is a testament to the clarity of Schwartz's analyses and to his rhetorical skills. The quality of the writing and presentation is yet another reason to read the book even if you are already well-versed in the pragmatist take on the issues. I know this material fairly well, and still found it valuable to follow Schwartz's well developed analyses.

The book is organized into four parts that deal with inquiry and knowledge, constructivism and world-making, ethics and normativity, and perception. There are one or two central ideas that run through all the papers, each having to do with a critical difference between the traditional pragmatist and analytic assumptions, and in drawing on them Schwartz can make his arguments with respect to each of the general topics.

The first of the relevant differences between the two traditions concerns epistemology. As Schwartz puts it, the analytic approach to epistemological questions has been to ask after the necessary and sufficient conditions that a proposition or belief must meet to count as knowledge, and the presumption has been, loosely put, that a proposition or belief counts as knowledge when it accords with a state of affairs to which it refers. One of the reasons analytic philosophers have tended to dismiss or reject pragmatism is that they do not see how pragmatists in their epistemology address these matters. And they are right that pragmatists do not address these questions, and they do not do so because they tend to regard the analytic points of departure as misguided

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from the start. As Schwartz puts it, if we want to understand the cognitive then we need to begin not with formal accounts of propositions such that they count as knowledge, but rather with an examination of the process of inquiry itself. Schwartz addresses many of the detailed issues that this quick description elides, but even the quick and general account of the difference indicates the gulf between the two approaches. Not surprisingly, Schwartz argues that analytic philosophers have tended to miss this point in their criticisms of pragmatism, and furthermore, that pragmatism has very good reason to approach the whole epistemological issue the way it does.

The second general point is related to the first, and that is that analytic philosophers tend to assume that there is such a thing as reality entirely or largely independent of us, which is to say that they generally reject the idea that people play a centrally constructive role in what reality is and how we understand it. Analytic philosophers tend to be 'realists' in this sense, and the pragmatists are in their view 'anti-realists'. For Schwartz, though, pragmatists are neither realists nor anti-realists, but constructivists. Again, pragmatism rejects the initial terms in which the analytic issue is framed, which not surprisingly contributes to a tendency for the two traditions to talk past one another. In Schwartz's hands, however, the two engage directly, and pragmatism emerges as the conceptually stronger position.

These two philosophic perspectives – an inquiry-based epistemology and constructivism – inform Schwartz's discussion throughout the book. With respect to knowledge, for example, the analytic assumption is that there is an independent reality, a state of affairs, to which a proposition refers, and the proposition counts as knowledge if and only if it accords with that independent reality. There are of course other conditions that a proposition must meet on this view, but for our purposes we can focus on this one. If, however, it is more reasonable to take a constructivist approach to our conception of reality, then as a general understanding of knowledge, the analytic approach does not work. Arguably, or so the

classical pragmatists and Schwartz argue, approaching the whole matter from the point of view of inquiry, and the constructive role people have in it, gives us a much more satisfactory and useful understanding of knowledge and the instrumental role ideas play in the process, not to mention of the nature of truth.

In part, it should be pointed out, what makes the pragmatist approach in epistemology preferable to the traditional analytic way of considering knowledge is that many of the so-called epistemological problems that arise in the analytic tradition simply do not come up for the pragmatists. Solipsism is an example, as is skepticism. For his part, Schwartz pays attention to three other problems that he calls the Pessimistic Induction Puzzle, the Preface Puzzle, and the Lottery Puzzle. These are 'problems' that arise in the context of the role of probability in knowledge, and Schwartz argues, convincingly I would say, that they are in fact pseudo-problems. On pragmatist grounds, the probability involved in each of these puzzles does not undermine the legitimacy of accepting theories if those theories prove useful to accept, and no more than this is or should be required of us to justify accepting a theory. In other words, pragmatism can handle these issues successfully, and in ways that the analytic assumptions do not enable.

The same general points apply to normativity and ethics, which Schwartz takes up in Part III of the book. If we look not at the formal traits we expect or want a normative judgment to have, but instead at the actual role ethical judgments play in our lives and interactions with one another, then we avoid many of the conundrums that analytic approaches to ethics find themselves mired in, as in the case of epistemology, and we can achieve a more satisfactory understanding of ethical judgment and normativity generally. One problem for analytic philosophers in taking up pragmatist constructivism in ethics, as we pointed out above, is that the pragmatists simply do not accept many of the dualistic alternatives in which the analytic debates are framed. In the case of ethics, these would include such dualisms as fact and value, reason and desire, thought and action, is

and ought, means and ends, the individual and society, and others.

Ethical norms, we may say, are not facts of the world to discover, as analytic ethics and metaethics tend to have it, but principles that arise in the interaction between individuals and their environments. For Schwartz, here, as in the case of epistemology, the distinguishing feature of the pragmatist approach is its treatment of inquiry. As with knowledge generally, we do not start from a 'beginning', and we do not aim for the ideal. We start in the middle of things, re-evaluate when the need arises, and stop when we think we have reached the better of available alternatives in the way of thinking and acting. In this respect at least, the pursuit of ethical norms is no different than the pursuit of scientific or philosophical understanding. And by going through the dualisms and dichotomies, we reach an understanding that is not only useful in ethical practice, but that demonstrates conceptually the unnecessary nature of the dualisms from the start.

The constructivism that is explicit throughout the book is considerably reinforced in Schwartz's analysis of perception. In what may be the most original contribution to pragmatist thinking on these questions, Schwartz argues that the traditional assumptions many of us make when we talk about perception, specifically that sensory experience often is illusory, is misguided and unsustainable. His point is that when we say, for example, that we are mistaken when we see two lines as different in length when in fact their measurement is equivalent, we are illegitimately positing one relational context – measurement – as 'reality', and the other – in this case the phenomenal – as illusory. But there is no good reason to say that one set of relations, and the property that two lines have in it, is any more 'real' than the other. They differ, and they function differently, and our understanding of ourselves, perception, knowledge, and reality will

be greatly enhanced by understanding this. Points like these have been made before by James, Dewey, Buchler, and others, and Schwartz has advanced the issue by addressing the problems in the context of contemporary literature on perception more carefully and thoroughly than anyone else of whom I am aware. In this regard, Schwartz makes a genuine contribution to pragmatist thinking.

As is always the case, there are points here and there that I wish Schwartz had handled differently, which is a way of saying that I disagree with what he has said. To give one example, in a discussion of art, one that is admirably lucid and insightful, it is unfortunate that Schwartz follows some other philosophers of art and uses the term 'lying' to describe the fact that art does not reproduce nature. His whole point in this discussion (Chapter 8) is that in not representing nature, art in fact adds to it in a way that can be called constructive. I think he is right about that, but letting this be called lying makes it less plausible. Furthermore, it can easily obscure the important fact that art can be and often is cognitive in the sense that it contributes to our understanding of its subjects, which would be odd at best if we also want to say that what art does is a lie. On a more positive note, in the same chapter Schwartz takes up the question of the relation of art and science, and interestingly makes the important point that science asserts, but art typically does not. In this respect, though he may not realize it, he shares an insight with Justus Buchler's theory of judgment.

As many of us have been aware all along, pragmatism more than holds its own in the understanding of fundamental and profound aspects of the world and of the many dimensions of human life and experience. Schwartz has gone a long way in helping us understand even better than we might have why and how that is the case.