

Probabilistic Agency: A Pragmatist Epistemology of Action and Adaptation

Epistemology: the theory of knowledge, what separates opinions or unsupported beliefs from justifiable beliefs. The following is quick look at the epistemologies of various schools of thought.

Epistemologies Compared: Pragmatism vs. Other Traditions

School	What is knowledge?	Truth is...	Certainty comes from...	Core Weakness
Rationalism	Justified true belief via reason alone	Logical coherence or self-evidence	Intuition, logic	Ignores lived reality, overtrusts abstraction
Empiricism	Sense data processed by the mind	What corresponds to observation	Accumulated sensory experience	Undervalues theory; struggles with abstraction
Skepticism	Uncertain, provisional at best	Potentially unreachable	Doubt, fallibilism	Paralysis or nihilism
Idealism	Mental constructs shaped by mind or spirit	What fits a coherent worldview	Internal consistency	Risk of solipsism, disconnect from feedback
Realism	Objective facts independent of mind	Whatever exists “out there”	Assumed objectivity	Ignores observer limitations and framing effects
Pragmatism	Adaptive tools for action, subject to revision	What works reliably in context and survives feedback	Interaction with environment, correction over time	Can seem vague; hard to define universal criteria

Beyond this short introduction I’m not going to address each of them but it helps to have a comparative model to judge the validity of what I propose. The important point is that each in its own way defines what a justified belief means. It is worth noting that belief is used instead of facts. In the modern world it is assumed that facts define justified beliefs. Most likely that is an artifact of the scientific revolution. Scientific facts have become the standard by which beliefs are judged as valid or invalid. Philosophy would say facts do not justify belief in and of themselves. Facts may or may not justify some deeper belief. For example it is a fact that water is a precious commodity that alone tells you little about how it should be used. Belief rotates around relationships, as in how water should be allocated dependent on its relative abundance in a specific location. A belief may be it should be primarily allocated for agricultural use not personal or recreational use where it is scarce. That belief would be dependent on how scarce and if the agricultural use was necessary or purely an economic benefit. This holds even without ethical considerations to some extent. Here we come face to face with something that confuses non-philosophers. Philosophy is broken down into different fields for clarity. For example metaphysics or the study of what is meaningful, Ethics or the study of morality, epistemology or the study of knowing, so on and so forth. The various fields overlap and inform each other but the focus is critical. With that in mind we will avoid ethical considerations for the most part and focus on what knowing means.

The above definition of pragmatism is a general description but within every school there are various arguments on the detail and how it should be applied. Let’s consider what famous pragmatists had to say. *“The truth is what works... in the long run.”* —William James. Peirce: *Truth is the end of inquiry*—

meaning it's not static, but convergent. Those two statements get to the heart of what makes pragmatism different. It avoids the trap of final formulation and absolutism. Even using the word truth in it's full abstract meaning is to be avoided. I put it this way: there are no non-trivial absolute truths. Truth in a way becomes tautologies or self defining. For example everything that lives dies. An absolute truth that is trivially self evident. A non tautological statement would be death adds meaning to life. It is true and false at the same time. It is true if a person believes it and false if they do not. Pragmatism captures the nuance of the complexity and chaos that is reality. Pragmatism should not be confused with the colloquial meaning of practicality. It is a deeper logical substrate on which to build on.

A pragmatist's epistemology builds in error tolerance and correction. In this way, it's similar to Bayesian reasoning, evolution, and engineering safety margins. In a sense it is probabilistic not hard determinism. It could be explained as recursive approximation. Pragmatism addresses the weakness of language including the languages of math and logic. "The limits of my language means the limits of my world." — Ludwig Wittgenstein. In a more general sense we live inside our version of the world not reality. We don't have direct access to reality only what our senses, even if extended by instrumentation, and our cognitive abilities, local or distributed, allows. Our models of reality are always approximations or models not the thing itself. Those models will always have errors and blind spots. What science has done is make those approximations very accurate and precise through reductive mechanism. In a way science makes reality simple enough for us to "understand".

Philosopher W.V.O. Quine argued that no belief, not even logic or math, is immune to revision. That insight shook the foundations of analytic philosophy but life has always known that secret. Logic is a tool that is powerful in human hands but it remains contextual and environmentally dependent. The world pushes back, and only feedback decides what holds. Adapt or die is the final logic. From this perspective knowledge is information and cognition that is adaptive. Not in just a practical sense but in an intellectual, emotional and "spiritual" sense.