

## **Truth as intersubjective epistemological commitment – a pragmatic account of truth**

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### **Abstract**

How should we understand truth, if we take the practical human life and the inevitable fallibility of all our convictions as the starting point? The aim of this article is to propose one possible answer to this pragmatic challenge. It is argued that the existing answers of leading pragmatic philosophers have in their particular ways ignored the way the notion of truth is *used* in everyday discourses. I propose that ‘truth’ is used first and foremost in negotiations about the fabric of our shared reality. Accordingly, truth is defined here as a conviction behind which the individual or an epistemic community places their entire epistemological authority. By stating that something is true we are communicating that we are convinced about the certainty of some particular matter and that we demand that our audience adopts this conviction as part of their understanding – that it is made a part of our shared understanding of reality. Although by adopting this understanding of truth we must give up certain features we usually would like to have as part of our truths – universality and infallibility in particular - I argue that this is mostly a psychological loss. On the upper side, we gain an understanding of truth that connects it to its everyday usage and makes also the reflective usage of the notion of truth possible in a world where final certainty is out of reach.

## **Introduction**

What role does the notion of ‘truth’ have in a contingent world where all our views and beliefs are in the end fallible? This has posed an enduring challenge for thinkers in the pragmatist tradition of philosophy. The basic starting point for pragmatism is the notion that as human beings we are thrown within a world of experience that we attempt to make sense of as best as we can. Fortunately, we have the company of others in this journey and thus inquiry becomes “a struggle from a lived perspective which includes social and communal aspects” (Hildebrand 2010). We can, however, never escape the limitations of our humaneness and thus our reasoning and its end-products, such as beliefs and certainties, are always “uncertain and corrigible” (Pihlström 1996:380) – in other words fallible.

In this essay I attempt to join the pragmatist tradition by confronting the question of the nature of truth and by offering one suggestion on how we might define ‘truth’ given the basic pragmatic outlook. The main inspiration for my suggestion is the philosophy of John Dewey although it deviates from it in some important ways. It builds on some of Dewey’s insights but stands or falls independent of it.

## **Setting the stage: Pragmatic conceptions of truth**

Pragmatism, as understood here, means a way of doing philosophy that takes seriously the practical human life as a starting point for all philosophic contemplation. This means that there is “no completely ‘neutral’ place from which to begin one’s argumentation in [- -] broad, all-inclusive philosophical matters” (Pihlström 1996:16). For our purposes here the most important point of pragmatism is its fallibilistic attitude; acknowledging that “our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy” (CP 1.171). Applying this general attitude of pragmatism to the question at hand, definition of ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’, Margolis points out that we must be “prepared to acknowledge the deep informality of all such inquiries and their dependence on the flux of social and practical life” (Margolis 2006:8).

Given this starting point, the classical correspondence theory of truth does not seem fitting as we seem unable to ever capture that to which our truth would then refer to; the world itself seems to be unreachable for a committed pragmatist. Another classical strategy –

identifying truth as the ultimately justified belief – also seems premature given the fallibilistic attitude of the pragmatists. This has led to pragmatist philosophers reverting to different strategies as concerns their understanding of truth. To give some background to the notion I myself am proposing here, I will shortly describe some major strategies taken by some of the leading pragmatic thinkers.

Peirce famously identifies truth as that what would ideally be found at the end of the inquiry: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality.” (EP1: 139.) Behind is a strong belief in the power of the scientific method to stable out individual differences so that in the end everyone arrives – or would arrive, given unlimited time – to the same certain solution.

James, in turn, notoriously talks about the ideas becoming true “*just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience*” (James 1991:28). For him, the pragmatic value of a proposition determines the extent to which it is true. “Any idea upon which we can ride [- -] any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, *true instrumentally*” (James 1991:28). Despite being more interested in *warranted assertability* than truth, Dewey seems to have adopted a similar understanding of truth: “Objective truth means interpretations of things that make these things effectively function in liberation of human purpose and efficiency of human effort” (ED 2: 128)<sup>1</sup>. In determining the truthfulness of a certain proposition we should thus not look at the past but at the future; we should try to determine whether the idea as an

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey’s take on truth is a bit ambiguous, however. In the article *The Development of American Pragmatism* (1925) he concludes that “truth ‘means’ verification, or if one prefers, that verification either actual or possible, is the definition of truth” (ED1: 7). He notes that “theoretically [- -] even such verifications or truths could not be absolute” and “logically absolute truth is an ideal which cannot be realized” (ED1: 8) and points out that in pragmatism future and the value of consequences are central. Thus even this verificationist account of truth seems to be for him connected with the functioning of ‘truths’ in serving human purposes. Taking full issue with this ambiguity goes unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

instrument will prove useful in securing the accomplishment of our particular projects and goals.

Of the more modern pragmatic writers, Richard Rorty's attitude towards 'truth' need to be mentioned. He takes quite a skeptical attitude towards the whole concept and writes that "there is no interesting work to be done in this area" (Rorty 1982:xiv). He seems to think that we find no practical difference between the propositions 'snow is white' and 'it is true that snow is white'. From the pragmatic point of view both of them say the same thing and given his version of the pragmatic maxim according to which "if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy" (Rorty 1998:19; see also Wrenn 2005) we should not have anything substantial to say about the notion of truth. For him, truth was a preoccupation of the "literary genre we call 'philosophy'" but as nothing interesting emerged during its long history, it would be time to "change the subject" (Rorty 1982:xiv). At the most, truth could be used as a rhetorical device.

Much has been said about these three conceptions of truth and I will not go into the details about the many criticisms that have been laid upon them or the various ways they in turn have been clarified and defended. These debates have been recited already many times (see for example Haack 1976; James 2002). What I will suggest, however, is that all three have in their particular ways ignored the way the notion of truth is used in everyday discussions. They have been intellectual reactions to the epistemological hardships that the authors have seen too clearly to stand between a proposition and it being true unconditionally and absolutely. Being such intellectual reactions they have gone quite far away from the actual practical use of the notion of truth. This makes these propositions unpractical in explaining or refining the usage of the notion of truth in our everyday life.

### **How *truth* is used**

Having come to appreciate the fact that there are no ultimate certainties to be found within the particularity of human life I for a long time upheld the opinion that we should abandon the notion of truth altogether. As the classical understanding of truth I had inherited from our Western tradition ties it to a correspondence to how things objectively are, I thought that this category is empty; that no truths would exist. Thus I drew the conclusion that we should abandon the notion of truth altogether as an unnecessary concept. I thus arrived to

more or less the same conclusion as Rorty thinking that the proper reaction to the contingency of the world we live in is to give up the notion of truth altogether.

Quite soon I realized that this kind of intellectually based suggestion ignored totally the great role the notion of truth has in lay conversations and in general in our society. It is evident that truth does matter in our society! Otherwise there would not exist such heated debates around the concept itself and especially around the truth of some special cases. Given the almost sacred aura that surrounds the concept of truth, it is clear that there is something important conveyed in the notion. More basically, the society would not have invented the whole concept would it not serve some kind of function in our language games (Wittgenstein 1953) or everyday discourses. As pragmatists, therefore, we should be interested in these special functions the notion plays in people's interactions. They deserve to be examined in some detail.

One key to understanding the meaning of truth in everyday life is that "the opposite of truth is not error, but lying, the willful misleading of others" (ED 2: 102). Another key is that in common intuition "truth is a goal of inquiry" (Wrenn 2005:95). In his essay, *The Problem of Truth* (ED 2: 101-130), John Dewey remarks how in ordinary discourses the truth is not a dry, purely epistemological notion, but a notion with strong moral associations: "Truth, as a noun singular, practically always means to the common man a conclusion to which one should pay heed, a general view of things upon which one should regulate one's affairs" (ED 2: 102). The distance from Helsinki to Burlington, Vermont is 6245kilometers. Making such a statement I have no necessity to add that 'It is true that the distance from Helsinki to Burlington, Vermont is 6425 kilometers'. Such an addition would seem quite out of place here. Following Dewey, we might remark that "it is somewhat forced, from the common-sense point of view, to include such purely descriptive, such as it were, external and irrelevant, matters in a term so dignified as 'Truth'" (ED 2: 102). When we feel the necessity to state that something is true, it usually means that stakes are higher, that it really does matter whether the other person believes our assertion or not.

Thus, the "import of the term remains socially determined" (ED 2: 103). The concept of truth is used first and foremost in determining the mutual agreement on certain topics. Truth is a device through which the speaker communicates to the audience that his or her statement should be taken seriously, that the audience really should adapt it as part of their

belief system. We are constantly redefining the social reality in which we live; through our interaction we are constantly sustaining and renegotiating the common, shared understanding between us (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966; Searle 1995). Shared understanding, in turn, is a social necessity for a species like ours whose life is dependent on the “action-orienting mutual understanding”, as Habermas (1978:310) would put it. As this “common understanding” (ED 2: 103) is a central sphere within which our life and its particular projects take place our interest in influencing it is high.

In this constantly ongoing negotiating process, truth is our strongest weapon. By stating that a proposition is true, we put our whole epistemic authority behind the proposition. The practical difference between the notions “the cat is on the mat” and “it is true that the cat is on the mat” is that in the second case, the stakes are higher. I might be responding to some accusations about me lying about the whereabouts of the cat or to someone’s outrageous (from my perspective) comment that the cat is not on the mat when I clearly see that it is there. A split has appeared in the reality we share and therefore I have to take a stronger tool to fix this breach; to get back to a situation where we again agree on the nature of reality. Were it the case that we would be accepting the same reality from the beginning, I would have no inclination to use such a strong tool as ‘truthfulness’ to state that the cat is on the mat. Only when an interpretation I hold strongly is threatened to not be included as part of the shared reality I feel the urge to use the notion of truthfulness to signal that I really see my view as an essential part of our mutual understanding.

The intelligent notion where “truth is a purely cogitative relation between intelligence and its object” (ED 2: 102) thus does not capture how truth is used in actual terms in everyday life. In fact it more or less conceals this usage. When I am alone in my summer cottage in a remote island trying to determine for myself whether the weather is good enough for a fishing trip I have no use for the term. Some signs in the nature make me more or less certain about whether the weather is going to stay good enough for the next few hours. I base my actions on certain certainties – I might, for example, be sure that it will be a sunny afternoon. But nowhere will I have use for the notion of truth as long as I am alone there on the island. Only when on some Friday another human being arrives on the island and we have to start negotiations about the shared reality, will that term be useful again. Therefore connecting the notion of truth to a view where there is a “self-enclosed island of mind on

one side” and “against this is set a world of objects which are physically and cosmically there” (ED 2: 104) seems not to capture what the notion of truth is normally used for.

In addition to this way the concept of truth is *used* there is, naturally, also the common sense *understanding* of what truth means. In the prevalent Western common sense understanding truth is connected to ‘how things really are’; truth is seen to be something fixed and final. James notes this and states that “The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality” (James 1991:88) while Rorty remarks: “For ‘truth’ sounds like the name of a goal only if it is thought to name a fixed goal -- that is, if progress toward truth is explicated by reference to a metaphysical picture, that of getting closer to what Bernard Williams calls ‘what is there anyway’” (Rorty 1998:39). We cannot escape this common sense usage of the notion of truth, in fact, I myself have had to struggle in this essay to not use the term in this sense; to mark statements that I take for granted. But even the case being this, I still believe that the way the concept of truth is used is of primary importance. The particular metaphysical theory that lends justification to this kind of usage is, I believe, in the final analysis to be seen as a derivative of this basic usage of the term. We need a concept through which to discuss with others ‘how things really are’ but whether this concept needs to be backed up by a certain metaphysical picture is more of a cultural matter. Different cultures might have different sources of authority for establishing their shared understanding but establishing some form of shared understanding is a basic function of a culture (e.g. Tomasello 1999).

### **Truth as intersubjective epistemological commitment**

Having now explored how truth is used in everyday conversations we, as philosophers attempting to define truth, have a couple of options before us. We might ignore the layman conception of truth altogether as wrong, as a misunderstanding or as not being useful and propose a new definition for the concept. This seems to be a major strategy favored by the philosophical tradition since the times of Plato. Generations of philosophers have attempted to define truth in ways that would secure its authority in something beyond the mere individuals and communities stating something to be true (cf. Dewey 1960). Second option is, along with more skeptically oriented philosophers such as Rorty, to abandon the notion of truth altogether. Here we find philosophers who think that the concept of truth promises something that the reality can never deliver and therefore we would be best off, if we

abandoned the use of the concept altogether in our philosophy. Third option, which I attempt to pursue here, is to take seriously this practical use of the notion of truth and build the theory of truth around it.

What I propose, therefore, is that truth should be understood as *a conviction behind which the individual or an epistemic community places their entire epistemological authority*. Truth is *used* to remark statements that (a) we are so certain about and (b) we feel to be so important that we are willing to take the full responsibility for their accurateness in the eyes of a certain audience. By stating that a statement is true, an individual or a community signals that the statement is of such grave concern that the others should really adopt it. Usually the notion of truth is used only in situations where one feels that one's conviction might for some reason or other be challenged or threatened.

What this implies is, firstly, that truth is deeply tied to the speaker; to the person or community who appeals to it. Truth is “first of all truthfulness, a social virtue, meeting a demand growing out of intercourse, not a logical, much less an epistemological, relation” (ED 2: 102). Secondly, it means that when we say something to be true, we are addressing an audience. To be more precise, our truth-claim is addressed to an epistemic community that we attempt to convince. Against classical notions of truth where truth is a relation between the subject and the object I offer here a relation between the speaker, the audience and the object of speech as a more accurate understanding of the nature of truth. Truth is about the speaker and an audience negotiating about their understanding about a shared object of understanding.

By epistemic authority I mean the authority that an individual or a community has over the beliefs and certainties of others. In essence it is about how believable source of knowledge the individual or community is for the audience. This authority is, of course, relation- and topic-specific. It is relation-specific in that an individual's epistemic authority is different for different people. The protagonist in Tim Burton's movie *Big Fish* is inclined to tell wonderful and imaginative stories about his life and people he has met. His epistemic authority in the eye's of his five-years old son might be almost God-like, his every statement is taken as a statement about how the matters really are. At the same time, among more grown-up people his epistemic authority is regarded as quite dubious because his stories violate so many laws of reality grown-up people have come to uphold as certainties of life. The authority is also

topic-specific; even with the same audience my epistemic authority in certain matters might be remarkably higher than in others. Standing among car-mechanics as a philosopher my statement that “It is definitely true that Kant’s philosophy had a major influence on the way we Europeans today understand the world” has a big authority behind it and they might take it as a final statement that concludes the matter. On the other hand, my statement that “It is definitely true that Saab is a better car than BMW” would be met with suspicion, if not open amusement.

By epistemic communities, in turn, I mean a group of people that share or aim to share a mutual understanding on certain topics. A prototypical example would perhaps be a devoted religious community that demands a strong compliance on the authority of holy scriptures and the holy men (unfortunately, they usually still are men) interpreting them. No deviations are allowed but everyone must share the same basic convictions. Another example would be a group of scientists that work within the same discipline and attempting to explain the same phenomenon. Although everyone might be promoting their own theories as the best way to explain the phenomenon at hand, the aim is to establish a mutual understanding. A more mundane example would be a small fisherman community on a remote island that need to have a mutually shared understanding of how their small and vulnerable community is going to survive in the face of the harshness of the nature. Generally, as social human beings, some form of shared understanding is needed for any form of interaction or co-operation to take place. So whenever we speak of two or more people that are in interaction, we can call it epistemic community. We must of course remember that although it is easier to discern the epistemic communities when we think of them as having distinct borders, in real life these epistemic communities are always overlapping, lacking clear borders and under constant re-interpretation. The epistemic communities are constructed and reconstructed continuously in the same manner as the shared reality within them is continuously reconstructed.

Truth as defined here thus occupies a middle ground between mere subjective notions of truth and purely objective accounts of it. It goes beyond subjectivity in stating that truth is something which we negotiate with others. If we had no interest in others adapting our conviction we would not feel the urge to call it a truth in front of the others. Therefore truth is not about my individual convictions but about me taking my individual convictions to the social field and attempting to negotiate them to be part of the shared understanding of a

community. Truth *happens* in the intersubjective field created by an epistemic community; something is made true by the community accepting it as part of their shared reality. At the same time truth does not refer to anything objective; to anything that would transcend the capacities of the individual members or the collective efforts of the epistemic community. Rather than being directly connected to the world independent of the human observer, it is connected to the deeply-held convictions of the members of the epistemic community.

Truth as a concept is thus a tool we use to make some proposition to be part of our shared understanding<sup>2</sup>. To properly describe this process we need a verb rather than a noun. A proposition is *truthified* when it is adopted as part of the canon of a certain epistemic community. The concept of truth is mainly used in these processes of *truthification*; in the process where an epistemic community negotiates about its shared convictions. A more static view would focus on the end-products of this process; on the certainties and convictions that an epistemic community has come to uphold. But as long as these convictions are shared by all and go unchallenged we have no need to assign the label ‘true’ to them; they simply function as convictions we base our shared understanding upon. The urge to openly proclaim them to be true arrives only when we feel that the shared understanding is for some reason challenged and must be reinforced or renewed. Thus the view of truth offered here is dynamic; it connects the use of the notion of truth to situations where we negotiate the shared reality, to situations where some propositions are truthified, not to situations where the propositions are shared, unchallenged and static.

This way of understanding truth is inherently normative. In order for some proposition to be called a truth, the person or community upholding it must believe in it, must themselves hold it as a certainty. It is not enough that a person presents some proposition as true; as something that the others should adopt. The person must also oneself sincerely believe in the proposition. This complies with the everyday usage of the notion of truth: If I claim something to be true in which I don’t believe in myself, I am lying. And as already remarked, lying is the opposite of truth-telling. The normative condition of the truthfulness of

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<sup>2</sup> Compare this with Hildebrand’s announcement that “Objectivity is a *tool*.” (Hildebrand 2010).

something thus is that the person or community uttering it thinks themselves of it as a certainty.

Finally, it must be noted that a description of a practice never captures the sense of practice itself (see Bourdieu 1990). When we take up a “viewpoint” on it and thus constitute it “as an object” we are fundamentally removed from the smoothly and unreflectively flowing action that the practice itself is about (Bourdieu 1990:27). Thus, the reflective account of truth presented here is a different thing than the actual practice of *truthification*. We therefore have here two ways of using the notion of truth: firstly the layman use, the unreflective utilization of the concept in everyday conversations. Calling this layman usage, though, is a bit misleading because even the most profound philosopher tends to use the notion of truth unreflectively, in trying to convince the others of how things ‘really’ are. For example, when the guard falsely accuses the philosopher of stealing Prozac from the local pharmacy, she might scream: “That is not true!” without any consideration of the exact epistemic dimensions of her proclamation<sup>3</sup>. The second usage, then, is the reflective one, where the person uses the notion with a clear sense of what he or she is doing in terms of attempting to convince an epistemic community. These reflective occasions are in the end rare and usually happen only within a discourse that is distinctively philosophical. The notion of truth offered here thus aims to capture both the reflective and the unreflective usage of the notion of truth. It aims to *describe* how we use the concept in our unreflective moments of everyday life and it aims to *prescribe* how we should use the concept when we want to be reflective and remain aware of what the concept really is about.

## **Multiple truths and the nature of disagreement**

One consequence of the notion of truth offered here is that it seems to allow for multiple truths to exist on the same matter. Different epistemic communities might arrive through

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<sup>3</sup> It is also the case that a layman user of the concept of truth does not have to accept the analysis offered here of his or her usage of the concept of truth. In the same manner as Kabylean tribe people would probably not accept Bourdieu’s functional explanations of their marriage and kinship systems (see Bourdieu 1990) many Westerners are so occupied with the lure of absolutism as to accept any other explanation of their usage of the concept of truth.

the process of truthification to different and incompatible convictions about the same matter. Does not this allowance for multiple truths on the same matter challenge the account – especially if it wants to stay true to the actual usage of the concept of truth? As Rorty notes, ‘true for me but not for you’ and ‘true in my culture but not in yours’ are weird, pointless locutions (Rorty 1998:2).

Firstly, it must be noted that as the notion of truth is primarily connected to the *process* rather than to the *end-products* of the truthification process, the incompatibility of different end-products is not in a strict sense a direct challenge to it. Be that as it may, we must secondly understand that the notion of truth is used exactly to challenge this disharmony caused by competing convictions; to bring the disagreement to an end and the disagreeing parties to an agreement. One invokes upon truth in situations where one observes that incompatible convictions indeed do exist and where one has a desire to bring one proposition to the truthified position. The usage of truth is thus a reaction to incompatibility; an attempt to bring it to an end; to bring the shared reality back to a situation of one, shared ‘truth’.

Thirdly, and most importantly concerning the practical usage of the notion of truth, it must be noted that two incompatible truths exist only in the eyes of a neutral outside observer. For the people engaged in the situation – people that have one conviction they are willing to defend – the situation does not differ from a situation where a single ‘truth’ would exist: The truth is on their side and the others are simply wrong. Only a disengaged outside observer sees how both parties are as much convicted of their own truths and thus sees the situation to involve two different truths. From the point of view of the believers in one of the truths the situation is in all practical senses similar to a situation where they really would be equipped with an ‘objective truth’. There are no practical differences between a person being absolutely certain about a theory and thus claiming it to be true and with a situation where in addition to this, the theory would be true in some objective sense. The person believing on the truthfulness of the proposition will act on it and defend it in a similar manner in both cases.

Similar answer could be given to one, who like Putnam (1981:55) insists that “truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that cannot be lost, whereas justification can be lost. The statement 'The earth is flat' was, very likely, rationally acceptable 3000 years ago; but it is not rationally acceptable today. Yet it would be wrong to say that 'the earth is flat'

was true 3,000 years ago; for that would mean that the earth has changed its shape.”

Granted, for a person engaged with our modern cosmology it is clear that it makes no sense to say that earth’s flatness was true 3,000 years ago. But from the point of view of that person who really lived 3,000 years ago and sincerely believed along with his contemporaries that earth is flat the truthfulness of the proposition seemed to be timeless. That does not take away the fact that after we have abandoned this ‘truth’ we can from the point of view of our new ‘truth’ state that the older view was simply wrong. Additionally, given the fallibilistic attitude that is taken as a starting point in this essay, we have a nasty choice to make. Either we define truth as something which cannot be lost, and be content with the fact that nothing can ever reach the status of truth in a human world characterized by fallibilism. Or we must define truth as something which can feel absolutely certain but which can, in principle, always be proven wrong<sup>4</sup>. In this case we have to suffer the losses to our psychological safety from not having a level of certainty we would want from the notion of truth. I prefer the latter of these options as it maintains truth as a concept that still has some use even in our fallible world.

The existence of different truths means also that when the truthification process fails, when the differing parties are unable to convince one another – as so often happens in actual argumentations – there are two possibilities: either the individual or epistemic community is after the process as convinced about their own convictions as they were before and willing to defend them as a truth also in the future. Disagreement between different epistemic communities thus doesn’t have to in any ways challenge the strong conviction the community has for its own convictions. Most obvious examples here are different religions inside of which there are to be found individuals who are gladly willing to proclaim how their own truths are the will of the absolute God and all the other religions are simply wrong. Unfortunately, other example that comes readily in mind, are some philosophical schools inside of which the same kind of fundamentalists are to be found. Second outcome of a failed truthification process is that the community learned something from the process – in the best case their horizons of understanding were widened (see Gadamer 2000) – and a

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<sup>4</sup> For an analogous shift from an unchangeable and static a priori to a priori that functions as certainty but is still dynamic and open for change, see Järvillehto (forthcoming).

doubt has crept into their minds and they no longer hold their proposition as self-evident. The latter often is a healthy development, I feel, though I will not in the context of this article go into my reasons for having such a belief.

The downside of this is that the understanding of truth offered here does not offer any straightforward way to resolve a conflict between two incompatible truths. No calculus is offered to which the disagreeing parties can turn to calculate the truth about any matter. This, however, is a situation that I believe is not dependent on our definition of truth. Even if we defined truth as correspondence to the objective reality and offered convincing grounds on some matter why our opinion is connected to this objective reality we still would have no guarantee that the others would be convinced. They could easily disregard or close their eyes from the evidence or be stubborn enough to accept the evidence but deny the conclusion. It would not help that truth ‘really’ would be on our side and the other party ‘really’ would be wrong. The conflict would still be there and the objective truth being on our side would offer us in the end only psychological comfort.

Connected to this, the theory of truth offered here might be accused of not offering a neutral ground from which to criticize and refine the dominant interpretations of reality. These charges are similar that James’ theory of truth faced. Cormier reports of these criticisms that, according to Russell, the theory “lost sight of true objectivity” and “ended up offering philosophical support to the arrogance, blindness, and rapaciousness of the colonialist Victorian and Edwardian eras” (Cormier 2001:xii). Some objectivity beyond the individual and the community is thus called for in order for the account to be remedial and not just an excuse for the dominant perspective to strengthen its stronghold.

For my part, I feel that such a worry is not warranted. I feel that a person equipped with an absolute conception of truth is more bound to stick to one’s own beliefs in an arrogant way and not listen to others compared to a person that understands how both sides of a discussion can be equally convinced about their own truth. More fundamentally, the pragmatic attitude of fallibilism, which is assumed in the background, seems to me, when taken seriously, to be a good remedy against such an arrogance. A person that sees all truths – including his or her own – as tentative and open for reconsideration should not as easily be seduced to hold his or her own beliefs to be true in a blindfolded way.

Finally, it must be noted that this understanding of truth takes nothing away from the fact that there can be more or less justified beliefs. The quest towards better epistemic justification is as relevant under this notion of truth as it would be under other notions of truths. When people attempt to persuade the others to adopt their truths the fact that they themselves take them to be true is usually not enough. They need to offer some justifications for their point of view in order to convince an audience. And this process of justification has its own virtues and vices that are not dependent on the definition of truth offered here. The questions over justification, evidence and warrants are as relevant and complicated here that they would be otherwise.

## **Conclusion**

We seem to get less than what we would want from the concept of truth. Biggest opposition to the present proposition is most probably that it seems not to give truth the elevated position that our normative intuitions would want to give it. With truth we would like to get something sure, something that stands out in the face of time and changing epistemic communities. We would like to have truth as some form of bedrock upon which we would be able to build our certainties never again having to worry about their accuracy. But all we seem to be left with is shared psychological certainty; a situation where we are all so certain about a proposition that it comes not to be questioned and for all practical purposes we rely on it as much as if it would be 'objectively' proven to be 'true'. Putnam's words about James aptly describe my account: I am "not going to give an answer to skepticism that is deeper than the perspective of shared human experience" (Putnam 1990:247). The dangerous possibility of reconsideration and challenge of every certainty seems not to escape the more reflectively inclined mind.

This is unfortunate and itself manifests how our quest for truth in the end manifests not a pure inquiry into epistemological relations but an underlying psychological need for certainty (Dewey 1960). When we as a culture took the reflective step outside of the cradle of unfaltering tradition and when we as individuals took the reflective step outside of the cradle of the omnipotence of our parents, there was no stepping back. Our craving for certainty can be likened to the psychological craving for basic safety that in adulthood is always threatened by our reflections about the lurking possibilities.

I believe that the presence of uncertainty in our reflective moments is something we just have to learn to live with. Given the human condition taken so central in pragmatism – and spelled out in the outset of this article – there simply seems not to be any escape from the fact that as human beings with no God’s-eye view we are bound up with a faith of having to live our lives within a world in which there are no Archimedean points. Therefore, a notion of truth – be it as philosophically sophisticated as it may – can never fortify our certainties as forever unchallenged. Therefore a notion of truth that is as modest as our changes of reaching certainties would better fit our lives than a notion of truth that promises something we human beings can never capture.

One form of solace I can give. From the point of view of the agents, the members of the epistemic community, there is no difference between truth based on something ‘objective’ and truth as it is understood here. The difference is only in the eyes of the neutral outside observer. As long as one is within a community that shares one’s convictions and doesn’t challenge them, one will live one’s life in relative peace. One will base one’s thoughts and actions on the convictions as if they would be objective – and this *as if* goes so deeply that the convictions even feel to be kind of bedrock convictions one doesn’t even consciously come to think as questionable. It is only in the deeply reflective moments of the individual that the certainties are put into question and the dark void of uncertainty opens up below them. Happily, no matter how much philosopher we have inside of us, for the most time in our life we live according to our convictions without questioning them at all. As concerns the majority of our convictions, the moments of doubt are rare and short-lived. We might end up with David Hume’s words of consolation:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

(Hume 1968:269)

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### Abbreviations:

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