

WHAT PRAGMATISM DEMANDS: A RESPONSE TO MCCARTHY

Mark Weinstein

*Institute for Critical Thinking
Montclair State University*

Let me begin with some basic points by way of orientation. First, I have deep sympathy with the sort of position that McCarthy offers. I too see rationality as manifest in various human practices and so see a deep pragmatic core to any adequate account of rationality. Second, I believe that Siegel cannot accept McCarthy's position, and has offered powerful arguments against any such view. Third, Siegel has offered a justification of critical thinking that relies on arguments far removed from McCarthy's concerns. Fourth, Siegel as well as myself may very well agree with both the spirit and substance of McCarthy's recommendations for educational reform. The last two, although crucial to an understanding of Siegel and relevant to McCarthy's positive agenda will not be discussed here. Rather, I will furnish a Siegel-like response to McCarthy, and attempt to extend McCarthy's position to meet Siegel's challenge.

McCarthy's Position¹

I take McCarthy to have made five moves relevant to Siegel's concerns. After accepting "for the sake of argument" that critical thinking is the "educational cognate" of rationality, she sees the need to "arrive at some idea of what is meant by 'rationality.'" Next she presents an "open question argument" that precludes rationality being defined in terms of "good thinking." Third, she argues that any attempt to ground a theory of rationality through theory would require that the theory be justified "showing that a 'rationality' construed in that way makes more sense than any other theoretical account. That is, one must show that it would be the rational thing to adopt that account of rationality." Fourth, seeing her analysis so far to entail that any attempt to develop a theory of rationality must either beg the question, or lead to inconsistency — negative criteria that McCarthy sees as "widely accepted" — McCarthy forswears any theory of rationality for which rational criteria must be furnished. Last, McCarthy resists the force of the open question argument and identifies "rational thinking" with "good" thinking, the latter to be identified, à la Rorty, with "solidarity with the community to which one belongs—for example, one is counted as rational when one's thinking is in accord with the standards accepted by the community, and irrational otherwise... the 'theory of rationality' is nothing more than a list that spells out for us the set of traits approved at a given time within a given community."

That much in place, McCarthy attempts to justify the pragmatic account, by appeals to its problem solving capability and the social criteria of intersubjective agreement including "how to get along with one's fellow persons," and indicates some consequences for critical thinking and teacher education.

How Siegel Might Respond

The first move is to distinguish between a justification of rationality and a theory of rationality. Siegel has argued that rationality is self-justifying, offering the following after Rescher:

Asking for a justification of rationality is asking for a rational justification; the very asking of the question commits the questioner to the presumption of the potential force of reasons, for in asking the question she is asking whether there are reasons which justify rationality, and in asking seriously she is committing herself to judging the matter in accordance with the strength of reasons which can be brought in favor or against being rational.²

Given this “transcendental” justification of rationality, a theory of rationality must be supported by reasons, and so Siegel is free to see McCarthy as offering a theory of rationality that relativizes the norms of reason-giving to the practices of particular communities. Siegel has arguments with which to reject such theories.

Siegel has argued that any theory that relativizes reason to communities (among other things) is incoherent because it “undermines the very notion of rightness...in which case relativism cannot be right.”³ Further, because it relativizes reasons to communities which might very well disagree, it runs the danger of holding that “all beliefs and opinions are true, yet, given conflicting beliefs, some beliefs must necessarily be false — in which case relativism cannot be true.”⁴

Siegel maintains that there are subject-neutral “general principles which apply across a wide variety of contexts and types of reason” and sees epistemology as offering a “*general* study of reasons, warrants and justification” claiming that, for example, merely subject specific reasons afford “only the most shallow understanding of ‘the epistemology of the subject’ — *here* we regard *this* sort of thing as a good reason — without understanding why this sort of thing should count as a reason here, but another sort of thing as a reason there.”⁵

Finally, in a recent publication, Siegel endorses Putnam’s “immanent/transcendent” distinction, maintaining that, although claims to rational justification occur within “cultural/historical circumstances” they must “also aspire to, and sometimes achieve, extra-scheme legitimacy.”⁶

I accept these arguments, and believe that McCarthy should as well. And so, what is needed is a non-relativist pragmatist account, one that ties the understanding of rationality to rational practices, but one that permits rational practices to be evaluated in a manner that requires that contextualized criteria be generalizable to relevantly similar contexts. Epigrammatically, I see this to require that putatively rational practices be seen as forming a network rather than a cone, and that any practice be held open to justification and critique in light of, and in contrast to, alternatives of the most varied kinds. This requires a reevaluation of the model of philosophical discourse that I see lying behind Siegel’s position.

What Pragmatism Demands

First some preliminaries. There are many hints in McCarthy’s paper that she may accept the sort of view I will put forward. The main thrust of what I will argue extends her and Rorty’s sense of community in ways consistent with her citation of McPeck and his focus on the academic disciplines. But there are indications in her text that my extensions may be unwelcome. For example, her frequent use of “we” may indicate a univocal sense of a privileged language community, perhaps best exemplified by the “ordinary language” of philosophers and other educated folk, with which I would fundamentally disagree. Alternatively, it may indicate a limited appeal to the rational sense of philosophers alone, an implication that I similarly reject. Further, I do not see judgments of rationality as limited to criteria found solely within the speakers’ discourse community, but insist that rational discussants be vigilant to identify and employ appropriate criteria drawn from practices found elsewhere, particularly from discourse communities representing other social and economic classes, other cultures and the like. Her call to “bring in as many ‘voices’ as possible into the conversation/inquiry” may signal agreement on this point as well.

I see the core of a pragmatist response to Siegel to require a reevaluation of the centrality of philosophical discourse. Philosophical arguments concerned with rational practices of all sorts have

two dimensions that pull in opposite directions. The first of these is the normative role of philosophy as a meta-discipline, a discipline that stands above other disciplines, offering general principles that furnish regulative perspectives that are to be generally applied. The second dimension, is that philosophical argument occurs within a particular discourse frame, and is characterized, as are all other discourse frames, by characteristic problem types, an idiosyncratic vocabulary, typical patterns of argumentation, and an underlying practice: mainly the examination and production of particular sorts of texts.

Philosophy as meta-narrative is essentially critical. The apparatus used, in the absence of the long sought after, but still unavailable, foundation for knowledge in general, is most effectively employed as critique.⁷ But the critical stance available within philosophy as a meta-perspective is too impoverished to offer a positive analysis of what makes arguments cogent. For example, philosophical epistemology typically abstracts principles from practices and assumes that principles can be understood a priori and in abstraction from their continued reinterpretation and application.

The most characteristic image of philosophy put forward and supported by practice in recent times sees philosophy as coextensive with conceptual analysis reflected in a priori arguments. But there is an alternative: to strengthen a priori reasoning with a greater concern with the details of actual practice as exemplified by regularized discourse communities. Such communities include disciplinary groupings, such as physical science, literature and the law, as well as social groups whose discourse is unified by common beliefs and characteristic norms for communication, for example, youth gangs and college professors.

Typical philosophical concerns underdetermine the range of available concepts employed in widely varying extra-philosophical arguments, and particular styles of reasoning characteristic of the various disciplines, social classes, and cultural groups. The concept types and argument patterns found, for example, in academic disciplines include, in addition to conceptual analysis, substantive generalizations, mathematical procedures, experimental design, statistical policies, literary and historical genre, and the like. Thus, if a theory of rationality is to be drawn from purely philosophical concerns, it will be an impoverished one. If epistemological inquiry is to address rationality as manifested across the many contexts of its deployment, philosophers must take seriously the widest range of concepts that function as normative constraints upon rational argumentation and the like. This is the pragmatic core. Unlike aprioristic philosophers, pragmatists must draw upon the widest range of putatively successful strategies for inquiry.

Such a pragmatic and naturalized epistemology, with its commitment to seeing reason as instantiated within the practice of discourse communities that employ normatively sanctioned principles, requires that *prima facie* authority be given to any community and the principles that they employ. This is independent of whether the principles in use are devised by the community in question or are, as seems to be more typically the case, a conglomerate of epistemological principles borrowed from elsewhere. The strength of Siegel's arguments is that whatever the character of the results of such a pragmatic epistemology, there are plausible candidates, a priori, that furnish boundaries to possible analyses. For example, in so far as Siegel's arguments remain intact in response to the unfolding dialogue of philosophers concerned with his efforts, we want to avoid both empty relativism and dogmatism, yet aspire to generality.

Thus, an epistemology that can ground rational practice must draw upon the norms in use in the various disciplinary and more ordinary rational practices, identifying the most likely norms which underlie apparently successful inquiries. Pragmatism demands that the ultimate epistemological principle be neither a priori certainty nor philosophical generality. What is required are epistemological accounts adequate to growing and changing appreciations of the wealth of practices of *prima facie* relevance to the understanding of rational pursuits.

Philosophical epistemology is where putative epistemological norms are analyzed and brought together to form as coherent a whole as the subject matter permits. But philosophical epistemology

must look in two directions. It seeks to reconcile the various norms in use by developing coherent theories of their relationship to knowledge and warranted belief, but it must also stand liable to the range and richness of those whose reason-giving practices have contours unknown to the philosophically minded. Thus, a pragmatist epistemology requires the comparative assessment of reasoning both across and within practices in a manner that privileges no practice as the court of last resort. This is the sort of theory of rationality that pragmatism demands.

-
1. Christine McCarthy, "We Don't Have a Theory of Rationality, and We Never Will — A Philosophically Pragmatic Point of View," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael Katz (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995).
 2. Harvey Siegel, "Rescher on the Justification of Rationality." *Informal Logic* XIV, no. 1 (1992): 28.
 3. Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 4.
 4. *Ibid.*, 6.
 5. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 34-37.
 6. Cited, by special permission, from "Radical Pedagogy Requires 'Conservative' Epistemology," a draft version of a paper to be delivered at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain.
 7. I argue this in, among other places, "Reason and Refutation: a Review of Two Books by Harvey Siegel," in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 11, no. 3 (1992).

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED