

Research Statement

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My research develops a framework I call “pragmatist realism.” The driving question is this: how should a naturalistic metaphysics of science be developed? My answer combines pragmatist methodology with a qualified realism about scientific entities and relations. This offers a third way between two positions. Traditional analytic metaphysics often carries excessive epistemological and metaphysical commitments. Neopragmatism can deflate the anti-anthropocentric and objective aspirations of scientific inquiry. My pragmatist realist position starts from the human perspective, from what our concepts do for creatures like us, without giving up on the world our sciences are about.

Neopragmatism is the dominant form of pragmatism today. It takes inspiration from quasi-realism in meta-ethics. Just as ethical statements do not aim to represent moral reality, statements about causes, modality, and mathematical objects have legitimate non-representational functions. If modal statements do not describe modal reality, for example, debates between modal realists and anti-realists become unnecessary. My research responds to contemporary neopragmatism in two ways. Constructively, I develop pragmatist realism, a view with roots in Peirce, Quine, and James Woodward, as an alternative that preserves what is right in the pragmatist starting point. Critically, I expose a recurring difficulty in the neopragmatist and conciliatory positions that dominate the field. Each promises to dissolve a first-order debate from a supposed neutral meta-level vantage. Each proves unable to account for its own standing at that level. The two tasks are connected. Because the global and neutralist options fail, pragmatist metaphysics must be piecemeal. The case-by-case work of pragmatist realism becomes necessary.

The constructive side of my work can be seen in my paper “Pragmatist Realism about Causation” (*Philosophy of Science*). There I refute perspectivalist arguments defended by Jenann Ismael and Huw Price. Perspectivalism claims that what causes are is essentially tied to human agency. The view is attractive because it takes a pragmatist insight seriously: our concept of causation is bound up with our practical lives as deliberating, intervening agents. I argue that this insight does not support the perspectivalist conclusion. The failure of these arguments yields a recipe. First identify relations like causation through human concerns and practices. Then seek out physical relations in the world that meet what has been identified pragmatically. The approach is analogous to physicalist metaphysics of color, and it is my template across other domains. The pragmatist is right about how we grasp the concept. The realist is right about what the concept answers to. We can marry a use-centric conception of causation with a non-perspectival objectivism about it.

“A Reflexivity Worry for Global Pragmatism” (a working revise and resubmit) challenges the position developed by Huw Price and defended by Amie Thomasson. Global pragmatism holds that every discourse can be given a functional-genealogical explanation of its social role, achieving independence from metaphysics. Using the neopragmatists' own resources, I identify one discourse for which this cannot be done. The explanatory strategy itself constitutes a discourse, one that tells stories about the function and utility of linguistic practices. I call it “pragmatic discourse.” By the global pragmatist's own standards, it demands the same treatment as every other. But any such story must employ the very vocabulary it is trying to explain. The global pragmatist cannot escape the “No Exit” problem for their own core vocabulary. Neither Thomasson's evolutionary-psychological strategy nor Blackburn's rolling pragmatism resolves the problem. Price's retreat to a thinner anti-representationalism concedes the most ambitious strand of the view. The upshot is that

the neopragmatist cannot win quickly. Expressivist accounts of scientific concepts must earn their keep case by case, if they are to be adopted at all.

“The Grounding Problem for Stance Voluntarism” (revise and resubmit) finds a similar difficulty in the scientific realism debate. Stance voluntarism, developed most fully by Anjan Chakravartty, is the leading conciliatory response to that debate's stalemate. It traces the gridlock to differing epistemic stances, clusters of attitudes and policies that are not truth-apt. It holds that both the realist and empiricist stances are rationally permissible. That claim rests on a thin norm requiring only that stances be logically and pragmatically coherent. The whole conciliatory project depends on this norm. I ask what justifies it, and from what perspective it can be defended. I argue that it cannot be justified from within any first-order stance. The most viable grounding strategy commits the voluntarist to epistemic instrumentalism, a contested thesis assumed rather than defended. Stance voluntarism is far less neutral than advertised. My arguments do not reject the view outright. They demand further work to secure its foundations, and I map various paths forward if the conciliatory promise cannot be vindicated.

“Dogramaci's Deflationism about Rationality” (*Synthese*) presses the same lesson within epistemology. Sinan Dogramaci argues that no unifying, explanatorily illuminating property answers to the term “rational.” He derives this deflationism from “epistemic communism,” the idea that epistemic terms function merely to coordinate a community around shared inferential rules, where any shared rules will do. Drawing on David Enoch and Joshua Schechter, I show that different sets of epistemic rules do not equally support this coordinative function. Deflationism need not be accepted even by epistemic communists. The same moral runs throughout my program. The social function of a discourse does not show that what it tracks is merely a conventional or deflated label.

Two further projects extend the program. In “The Zetetic Role of Mathematics in Science” (in progress), I argue that mathematics contributes to inquiry prior to any explanatory payoff. It can constitute phenomena as objects of inquiry in the first place. It individuates observations as instances of known structures and rescues apparent noise as phenomena worth investigating. Locating this “zetetic role” within the epistemology of inquiry sidesteps the dispute over what makes a mathematical contribution explanatory. It also extends my method to mathematics: identify what mathematics does for inquirers like us, without deflating the mathematics or the phenomena. This continues work begun in my review of Mark Povich's *Rules to Infinity* (*BJPS Review of Books*). Second, I am developing the historico-pragmatic method discussed within my stance voluntarism paper. It examines episodes in which theoretical commitment or restraint demonstrably drove scientific progress, then argues for local scientific realisms and anti-realisms on practical grounds within particular domains. This is a natural extension of a program committed to piecemeal answers. Across all of my work, the running theme remains the same: to show that a metaphysics of science can begin with pragmatist questions and method and yet still end with realist answers.