PRAGMATISM AND TEACHING PHILOSOPHY:
AN INQUIRY INTO TRUTH, RELATIVISM AND PRACTICE

by

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ABSTRACT

When applied to problems in teaching philosophy, pragmatism improves philosophical teaching. It does so by deflating and clarifying the meaning of its problems and providing ways to understand and evaluate their effects on students and teachers. Problems of truth, relativism and teaching practice are investigated and the extent to which the pragmatic attitude ameliorates some of their central issues is shown. The net results of the thesis are: 1. It does not matter philosophically if there is an essence to truth as far as education is concerned, 2. Relativism is not a problem to be explained away but an opportunity to meaningfully improve philosophical teaching, and 3. A pragmatic attitude deflates some of the central problems in teaching philosophy and gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences. Pragmatism improves teaching philosophy and assists in its necessary reorientation towards a practice that is future-oriented and embedded within the context of life.
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I dedicate this thesis to my beautiful and lovely wife, Claudine, without whom none of this would have been possible.
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I. INTRODUCTION

In teaching philosophy one needs to be very clear about its value and function.

Since this thesis is concerned with how philosophy should be taught, I need to begin with the question, “What is philosophy for?” A useful conception of the meaning of the function of philosophy is given in the conclusion of Bertrand Russell’s slim book *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912):

> The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find...that even the most everyday things lead to problems which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never traveled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect (Russell, 1912, p. 156-7).

*Possibility* plays a significant role here, and likewise in our present inquiry. It is the very thing to which we shall direct our energies and aspire to understand as it relates to pragmatism and teaching philosophy. And notwithstanding Russell’s own brand of philosophy – anti-pragmatic as it was – I concur with the tenor of his message that the function of philosophy resides in its ability to encourage the autonomous and self-critical use of one’s own reason. The function of philosophy is to make possible intellectual autonomy, and this seems to me its central value.
Philosophy must involve questioning the consequences of concepts and premises from which we begin. Its operational value is to carve out new possibilities for thought and action, new opportunities for human interaction, new modes or exit strategies for old ways of thinking. But novelty *in se* does not paint the whole picture as it relates to possibility since there are results of our inquiry that will remind us that some old habits and practices still help us solve present problems.

Philosophy’s function is identical with its value, namely: its capacity to help emancipate the mind from the constraints of tradition, authority, prejudice, and myopia to name but a few impediments to intellectual autonomy. But even though many of these constraints will always remain we must still ask: What is philosophy for? One answer is that it exists in order to assist in the development of the free intellect such that we are able to get along with the business of living in our world – philosophy has an intrinsic *instrumental* function. This same function of philosophy is tied to sociality, therefore, since an autonomous mind is only the necessary condition of its function. Its sufficient condition is other persons with whom we can inquire and test new possibilities for our world and how to live in it. It is this feature of the function of philosophy that compels us to consider why philosophy is valuable in the first place, or at the very least what value a philosophy that focuses on the effects our ideas and beliefs have on our actions, habits and practices possesses. And it is here where our investigation regarding teaching philosophy must begin as we turn to the *conceivable possibilities* that occur when teaching philosophy and pragmatism intersect.
The aim and results of the present inquiry are deflationary in nature and effect. Some philosophical and educational theories/concepts germane to our inquiry are inflated because they are filled with error and faulty reasoning. They are pumped up by the hot air of misconception, with the result that they become merely *prima facie* valuable. Nonetheless, they are at bottom artificial ideas superficially inflated with importance. The superficiality lies precisely in the ideas themselves, but in effect they become pedagogically valueless via their uncritical use. This is a perfect storm for unsound pedagogical practice that causes detrimental effects for the educational experience of all stakeholders. My thesis aims to *deflate* these potentially harmful notions. Thus, *by deflationary* I mean to reduce ideas, concepts and beliefs to their most meaningful import, stripping them of potentially superfluous, misguided and erroneous effects on practice. My goal is to bring claims down to earth to relate them to possible human practice or activity and not leave them *in abstracto*. On the one hand, they deflate problems in teaching philosophy relating to truth, relativism and practice because their questions do not assume stable and fixed meanings. Instead the questions probe into the *meaning* of these terms, what we can conceivably do with them, and how we expect them to behave in our analyses. The so-called ‘essences’ of these terms are called into question and the pragmatic method of the clarification of meaning is applied. We deflate them by looking beyond the narrow and fixed predicates of the terms and towards future action and practices, all the while careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater and jettison what is presently working well. In this way, our inquiry deflates traditional philosophical approaches to problems in teaching philosophy
with an eye to improving teaching practices in general. On the other hand, the results of the inquiry have deflationary effects because they call into question whether and to what extent they are problems at all. Sometimes what one philosopher calls a problem a pragmatist calls a possibility – and the aim of our inquiry is to interrogate the problems in teaching philosophy to discover if their meanings yield new possibilities for future action in the sphere of philosophical pedagogy.

Structurally, this thesis has three chapters that are thematically linked inasmuch as they are separate investigations that illustrate the uses of pragmatism in different ways. Chapter One addresses the problem of truth and truth theory in teaching philosophy, and how a pragmatic attitude ameliorates pedagogical obstacles to effective teaching. Similarly, Chapter Two explores the impact pragmatism has on relativism, and in particular how to deal with disengaged philosophy students. Lastly, Chapter Three focuses on philosophical teaching practice, and the extent to which a pragmatic attitude helps solve some central problems relating, but not limited to content and methodology.

At bottom, the main claim of this investigation is that when applied to problems in teaching philosophy, pragmatism improves philosophical teaching. It does so by deflating and clarifying the meaning of its problems and simultaneously providing ways to understand and evaluate their effects on students and teachers. The improvements are the result of inquiry and in this way our investigation is *pragmatic*. Consequently, the knowledge gained here is instrumental which in effect aspires to organize the experience of teaching philosophy satisfactorily.
II. CHAPTER ONE:

The Utility of Theories of Truth – Teaching Philosophy in Light of the Robust/Deflationary Debate

Chapter Introduction

It seems simple enough to say that a proposition is either true or false. Take the familiar example from logic that ‘snow is white.’ First, one may say that ‘snow is white’ because the statement corresponds to the fact there exists white snow in nature and on this basis is said to be true. Second, ‘snow is white’ is true if we accept other statements as being true such as ‘snow falls during winter’, ‘my eyes do not deceive me,’ and ‘white is a visible colour,’ etc. In this sense, truth is a function of the coherence of our ideas within the generally accepted framework of other statements. Third, one may conclude that ‘snow is white’ is true because it solves a practical problem or provides a basis for good action. Here truth is grounded in the effects of human experience; ‘true’ is what guides action truly, i.e., things work out as claimed. But consider the statements: ‘greed is good,’ ‘the number of stars in the universe is even’ and a notorious example from the history of philosophy, ‘this statement is false.’ How does one even begin to prove these true or false? Do they admit of intelligible logical analysis? Does it even matter for these statements to be true or false?

Accordingly, the focus of this chapter is not about how one can know whether a ‘truth bearer’ (proposition, statement, utterance, belief) is true or false. Instead, I focus on the meaning of truth and how an exploration of its meaning
affects education. The philosophical concern with truth, as considered here, is not ‘What is true?’ but rather, ‘What is truth?’ (Horwich, 1999, p. 929) and in this manner I discuss the latter question as it relates to education and teaching philosophy. But the philosophical concern with truth culminates in conflicting accounts of the meaning of truth, and has historically divided philosophers along the lines of robust and deflationary theories of truth. I am concerned whether truth has objective properties, and if not, what that says about what educators do when they teach philosophy. Philosophers have different theories or conceptions of truth that make its meaning problematic, thus posing further consequences for educators. It will be shown that the virtues of provocation, democratization and inclusivity are natural derivatives of the analysis of the truth problem, and more importantly, will emerge as beneficial outcomes of teaching philosophy. I maintain that education – the teaching of philosophy in particular – can best utilize the veracity and usefulness of robust theories of truth and provide students with the critical thinking skills necessary to appreciate deflationist views as well. I discuss three influential robust theories of truth and their most significant criticisms, and conclude that it does not matter philosophically if there is an essence to truth as far as education is concerned.

**The Robust – Deflationary Debate**

The history of philosophy is replete with theories of truth, and the degree to which contemporary philosophers agree about its role in philosophic discussion is unsurprisingly divergent. It is unsurprising because truth is so tightly wound into
the very fabric of our ideas that any discussion of it simply reinforces the inexorable connection between our thoughts and truth itself, hence admitting of very little logical clarity (Lynch, 2001, p. 2). That is, one cannot separate meaningful discussion about truth without invoking reasons as to why one’s own beliefs and cognitions are true, consequently producing a vicious circle that yields ambiguity. The discussion is divergent in part because theories of truth are intimately connected to one’s own philosophical temperament and thus vary significantly from one philosophic sensibility to the next.

Accordingly, the truth debate features on the one hand those who argue that truth not only exists, but also that it has some kind of essence or nature. Plato, Descartes, Kant, Russell, and Blanchard are representative of this position. This quasi-metaphysical nature of truth is said to be a “robust” property that requires substantive and complex explanations. Therefore, robust theories of truth are concerned with objectivity and espouse a version of metaphysical realism (Lynch, 2001, p. 5). Historically, correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth have been classified as robust since all have an account for truth with a single attractive explanatory feature (Horwich, 1999, p. 930). It will be shown later with regards to education that it is this very feature which rescues philosophical discourse from irrelevance.

On the other hand, deflationist theories of truth contend that there is no single robust property shared by propositions we claim to be true (Lynch, 2001, p. 5). Philosophers such as Quine and Strawson deny that truth has a nature and assert instead that the philosophical problem of truth is a pseudo-problem; truth is
not so much a problem to be explained, but a problem of language and semantic meaning to be explained away. Echoes of this sentiment exist in pragmatism – especially in James – in that “‘the true’...is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving” (James, 1907/1963, p. 98). It is a way of saying that a claim is a good claim because it works as it suggests. Generally deflationist views, following James, assert that “the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process” (James, 1907/1963, p. 88). The truth problem is ‘deflated’ so that it is philosophically manageable and reinvented to suit other, more ‘relevant’ functions. We therefore see elements of the analytic tradition in this side of the debate; the alleged failure to grasp the big picture about truth is the root cause of many philosophical mistakes (Kirkham, 1992, p. ix). One may be a deflationist, like Rorty, without subscribing to the main tenets of the analytic tradition. Deflationists deny the assertion that truth is qualitatively singular, and hence characterize any philosophical talk of truth as either abstruse or unfruitful or both. On this view, truth is not a thing; it is not something one has, but something one says. Consequently, deflationists stress that theories of truth should be seen as fulfilling some other function, (e.g. resolving logical and semantic disputes), rather than making claims about experience, thought and reality in general.

The key issue upon which the robust – deflationary debate rests is whether and to what extent truth is a property of belief. I will show that a reconstruction of robust theories is possible using a novel synthesis of my own objections and those
drawn from deflationary accounts. This will, in turn, illuminate and resolve some significant issues in education and teaching philosophy. But in anticipation of what I will say later about the role of truth in the philosophy classroom, I contend that the robust theory of pragmatism offers the best option to resolve the aforementioned dispute. My thoughts on this issue presuppose a certain type of discourse I hold to be germane to philosophy, one which is essentially provocative, democratic and inclusive.

**Rorty’s Quietism: Deflating Truth to Inflate Learning**

Before dealing with robust theories, I shall put the cart before the horse and discuss one version of deflationism that has influenced my thoughts about the nature of truth and its implication for education and teaching philosophy. Richard Rorty, along with other pragmatists, claims that “if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy” (Rorty, 1995, p. 281). One can therefore be suspicious of any direct difference between justification and truth since the former is always spoken of as the means by which one reaches the latter conclusion. In other words, justification and truth fit hand in glove and attempts to wrest one from the other in order to conceptualize them as separate is foolish. On this view, truth is a conclusion or judgment about a claim. Accordingly, one cannot think of it as something distinct from the process of inquiry or reaching a judgment, just as one cannot think of being ‘guilty’ of a crime as distinct from the process of having a trial and being judged. That is simply what ‘truth’ and ‘guilt’ mean to Rorty. If true, this poses a significant challenge to the status quo of pedagogical practice vis-
a-vis teaching philosophy. This is because philosophy teachers normally present truth and justification as mutually exclusive topics within the same subject strand (logic and/or epistemology), and treat the former as a means to achieve the latter. To complicate matters, since philosophers usually treat logic and epistemology separately for reasons related, but not limited to student engagement, content difficulty and teacher competence,¹ Rorty’s claim that they are one and the same may exacerbate the problem of what and how students learn about truth in the first place.

On this account, Rorty is committed to a species of philosophical quietism since he states there is no philosophical standpoint from which one achieves a clear understanding of the concept of truth. The bottom line is that “assessment of truth and assessment of justification are, when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity” (Rorty, 1995, p. 281).² This view deflates robust theories of truth because it states unequivocally that there is no practical difference between truth and justification; truth is the outcome of justification and thus they are not two different things but different phases of the same process.

Equally interesting is Rorty’s (1997) notion that it is undesirable to love truth. There are two implicit premises here, namely: 1. Truth does not correspond to some objective natural order, and 2. Truth does not exist independent of human language and history (Rorty, 1997, p. 13-14). It follows that from the perspective of teaching philosophy educators must deny the usual nominal starting point and

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¹ For current research on this topic, see Decker, J. (2011). Keeping logic in the major. Teaching Philosophy (34) 2, pp. 133-142.
abandon the traditional definition of philosophy as ‘love of wisdom’, or at the very least separate *philein* from *sophia*. On this view, the upshot is that philosophy teachers view the process of acquiring truth inseparable from the result of obtaining it, and that at bottom: the end (of attaining truth) does not justify the means (justificatory processes/inquiry) since they are inexorably linked. The process is just as important as its conclusion. Not only are they linked but the means have implicit within them the ends being pursued, and thus to speak of and teach them separately – and to view them as externally different – is a kind of pedagogical category error to be avoided.

*Liberation Education: The Truth of Philosophy as Provocation*

The above strategy is liberating for both teacher and student. For instance, it is often the case that philosophy teachers struggle with students who enroll in philosophy classes to ‘find’ and ‘be given the path’ to some eternal ‘truth’ about the universe. If the definition of philosophy is questioned it will engender a discussion as to why it may be problematic to view philosophy this way. This reformulation tends to encourage critical thinking and foster useful dialogue amongst students. I mentioned in my introduction that teaching philosophy must include the quality of provocation, and the above example is just one way by which this is achieved. This is what I mean when I say that teaching philosophy is inherently ‘provocative’.
Learning philosophy is equivalent to doing philosophy, and there is no better way to do this than by provoking the intellect and a person’s sensibilities.\(^3\)

The claim that it is not desirable to love “Truth” in the sense that truth is absolute and final is further supported by the underlying pragmatic premise that beliefs are made true by their utility in the inquiry experience, but not necessarily so. That which is said to be true is useful only contingently and conditionally; that something is said to ‘work out’ in a given instance is not grounds to claim that it is true universally or necessarily, and consequently, a belief is true to the degree to which it functions as it purports to function. And in the case of a general claim, it follows that a truth bearer has to continue to function as claimed in the next instance. For example, saying that the sun rises in the morning suggests it will continue to do so, so one has to project from past observations to unobserved future events, which is always uncertain (i.e., the sun could explode tomorrow, despite what we think we know about it). One implication for teaching philosophy is that no matter what philosophers say about the nature of truth (or lack thereof) it is nonetheless imperative that students learn the logical tools (methods, techniques, strategies) that will enable them to read, analyze, construct and defend philosophical arguments. I am suggesting here that philosophy students need to learn good methods even if they do not know what conclusions will be reached using them. For even if Rorty is correct in saying that there is no practical difference between truth and justification, it is still the case that what may be

\(^3\)There are ethical guidelines for such a pedagogical standpoint. For a frank discussion of the latter and the ramifications of such a position, see Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power.* (pp. 201-228). New York: Routledge.
justified and thus be considered true today may not be in the future. Equally
dubious is the assumption that what constitutes a ‘true question’ in a philosophy
classroom (or any class for that matter) is static and universal. It is often said that
there is no such thing as a stupid question, but what about a stupid way to ask a
question? I contend that the latter is far more problematic than the former since if
one engages another person uncritically, much more than stupidity will
undoubtedly escape one's mouth.⁴

**Truth as Correspondence**

One of the most common assertions in philosophy is that a proposition is true when
it “corresponds to reality.” This is built into the very structure of our language, the
very structure of logic and at bottom, the very structure of “reality.” For what do we
mean when we say that something is the case if not that it is *in fact* the case?
Aristotle put forward this notion over two thousand years ago, and it has been with
us ever since.⁵ On this view, truth is accounted for by the single explanatory feature
of ‘correspondence’. What truth ‘corresponds’ to is reality or fact. Similarly “truth
hinges not on us but on the world…whether a proposition is true does not depend
on what anyone believes” (Lynch, 2001, p. 9). From a metaphysical point of view,
facts exist independent of minds, and likewise minds possess beliefs which either
correspond factually to “reality” or not (Kirkham, 1992, p. 139).

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⁴Whether it is possible for teachers to even ask ‘true questions’ is investigated by Bingham, C. (2005). The hermeneutics of educational questioning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (37) 4, pp. 553-565.

⁵“To say that (either) that which is *is not* or that which is not *is*, is a falsehood; and to say that that
which is *is* and that which is not *is not*, is true.” Aristotle. (1966) *Metaphysics*, 1022b26. W.D. Ross (Ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
The correspondence theory of truth takes on the logical form “x is y” if and
only if x is y, which as I mentioned earlier is rather uninteresting and
uninformative. Deflationists argue that proponents of correspondence ‘inflate’ this
logical form by adding the ‘property’ of correspondence with reality (p) such that
the theory is logically expressed as x is y if and only if x really has the property p
(Horwich, 1999, p. 930). Nonetheless, all correspondence theories have in common
“the claim that the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the truth of a
belief...is that the very fact that the belief is a belief in must obtain” (Kirkham, 1992,
p. 140).

**Russell’s Congruence**

Bertrand Russell’s version of a correspondence theory of truth takes the form of a
structural isomorphism asserting a ‘congruence’ between true beliefs and facts
(Kirkham, 1992; Lynch, 2001). That is, “a belief is true when it corresponds to a
certain associated complex, and false when it does not” (Russell, 1912, p. 128). The
complex relations are the relation of belief and the relation of fact, and so if said
relations go in the same direction (i.e., their objects really do ‘in fact’ relate to one
another truly, and are thus going in the same ‘direction’), then the belief is true, and
if not, it is false (Russell, 1912, p. 128). For example, if the statement that “the cat is
on the mat” is true then this relation, on-ness, is repeated in the object domain such
that the cat is on the mat. Additionally, Russell claims that “what is called a belief or

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6 For a ‘realist’ response to this assertion which is based on observable instances of commonplace
correspondence, see Kitcher, P. (2002). On the explanatory role of correspondence truth. *Philosophy
judgment, is nothing but this relation of believing or judging, which relates a mind to several things other than itself. An act of belief or judgment is the occurrence between certain terms at some particular time, of the relation of believing or judging" (Russell, 1912, p. 126). Hence the truth of a claim is in part found in the relation between mind and object. Furthermore, Russell contends that “judging and believing is a certain complex unity of which the mind is a constituent. If the remaining constituents (statements and objects) form a complex unity, the belief is true; if not, it is false” (Russell, 1912, p. 129). Thus the truth of a claim is contingent only on a claim’s logical resemblance to what objects are purported to be associated with it.

I believe that Russell commits the fallacy of decomposition in that he is ascribing to the parts (truth bearer is true) a characteristic of the whole (the complex relation is harmoniously directed to justification, and hence true). In other words, just because a proposition bears a logical resemblance to the entirety of logical relations involved in its use does not imply that it is identical with it. But this is merely academic since the real problems with Russell’s theory rest on two seemingly insurmountable objections.

First, if truth is correspondence to the facts then there arises the necessary question as to what Russell means by ‘facts’. Surely a separate theory about the nature and proper use of facts would be required. If this is the case, then truth does not correspond to reality but instead to facts, which would entail a contradiction; to test the truth of a proposition is on Russell’s view to see if it corresponds to reality, but as we have seen the notion of ‘fact’ in his sense is problematic, and thus we
would require a fact to test a fact, in which case his thesis is invalidated wholesale.\(^7\) Second, if Russell is correct in locating the nature of truth in the correspondence to reality, then the question emerges as to what constitutes the nature of correspondence itself. This is equally if not more detrimental to Russell’s theory than the argument from fact. Even a generous reading would yield only a tautology in attempting to defend this train of thought\(^8\), and would resemble something like: ‘correspondence is the name of the direction in which beliefs and their objects directly correspond to reality’. But as we can see, this line of reasoning is absurd. Clearly, then, there are serious objections to this particular brand of robust theory.\(^9\)

**What Russell and Rorty can Learn from Each Other**

So we are now at a crossroads. We have seen that on the one hand following Rorty there is evidence that suggests that there is no practical difference between truth and justification – that truth is nothing other than the outcome or conclusion of a process of justification. On the other hand following Russell, we have seen that he------

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\(^7\) Blanshard, B. (1939). *The nature of thought.* (Vol. 2, pp. 260-279). London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. This is basically Brand Blanshard’s argument against Russell’s claim that coherence theory is a suitable “test” for truth once a significant number of truths have already been amassed by the correspondence theory. However, my objection regarding the problematic nature of ‘facts’ obtains irrespective of Blanshard’s argument since the latter has a specific function, i.e., to refute Russell’s claim that coherence is a second-rate theory best used only after the correct one has been employed, whereas mine is more general and therefore has more universal applicability to all theories of truth whose robust quality is a correspondence to reality.

\(^8\) For an alternative perspective, see Thomas, A. (2011). Deflationism and the dependence of truth on reality. *Erkenntnis, 75*, pp. 113-122. Here Thomas argues that there are good reasons for deflationists to believe that there exists an implied dependency between truth and reality which arises out of the context of human experience.

\(^9\) Most contemporary philosophers agree that Austin’s version of the correspondence theory of truth is an improvement upon Russell’s original formulation. He posits that correspondence is best construed as a correlation between whole statements and whole facts, resulting in a correspondence that is conventional, i.e. linguistic conventions irrespective of culture and historical context determine whether the logical context provides a ‘factual’ basis for true propositions. (cf.) Austin, J.L. (1950). Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society, 24*, pp. 111-128.
claims not only that there is a difference, but that truth exists prior to justification. I assert that both approaches are useful in teaching philosophy. The contrast between them represents a false dichotomy. Once it is recognized that education is served equally well by what works and what is valuable, the distinction becomes meaningless. If we apply the notion of utility latent in Rorty’s pragmatism to education, it is not always the case that evidence-based education provides optimal student success (Biesta, 2010). Often benchmarks or success-criteria in teaching are merely de facto and ad hoc attempts to justify educational policy. 

Alternatively, a given process of justification may be an undesirable one, hence one does not want in all cases to equate truth with justification. If we apply the notion of value latent in Russell’s realism to teaching philosophy (for what could be more logically valuable to Russell if not the accrual of true propositions?), it follows that both teachers and students alike may overlook the crucial point that the very notion of ‘correct facts’ is problematic. Accordingly, we must question Russell’s starting point and place more emphasis on the process, and similarly, the notion that conclusions, e.g., such as holding something to be a ‘fact, is independent of justificatory and inquiry-based processes. So with regards to Rorty and Russell, we do not want to equate a process with a good outcome, or a good outcome with a process. Here, good thinking as well as good pedagogical practice would suggest

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10 Conversely, it is intuitively true – and perhaps a priori – that qualitatively sound learning often results from direct attempts to repeat proven success patterns. One must only look to the early educational development of children for proof of this claim.

11 It may be the case that philosophy teachers ignore the history of ideas and treat topics in the history of philosophy ahistorically. Moreover, it may also be the case that the topics they treat ahistorically have either already been discussed in the history of philosophy, or are no longer relevant to students. For a rigorous defense of the reversal of this tendency, see Kitcher, P. (2011). Epistemology without history is blind. Erkenntnis, 75, pp.505-524.
that means and ends inform one another. Therefore, teaching philosophy *mutatis mutandis* can make meaningful sense out of both robust and deflationist theories of truth in practice.

**Truth as Coherence**

The second robust theory of truth I shall discuss is known as the ‘coherence theory of truth.’ It is the view that an idea is true because it is consistent with other ideas that have been accepted previously; truth is identical to verifiability in the sense that "true" ideas are those that are found to be consistent with other ideas currently held to be true. One must also add the further assumption that verification is holistic; truth bearers are verified if and only if they form a part of an entire system of truth bearers that is internally consistent and harmonious. Thus truth is accounted for by the singular explanatory feature of coherence qua verifiability (Horwich, 1999, p. 930). Coherence is not merely consistency, but rather a matter of comprehensiveness and absolute entailment.

Coherence theories of truth have their roots in neo-Hegelian philosophy, specifically in the late 19th century writings of Joachim and Bradley (Lynch, 2001, p. 99). According to Joachim, truth is “the systematic coherence which characterized a significant whole” (Joachim, 1906, p. 79). On this view – as with all Hegelian notions – one is committed to a brand of idealism that rejects the subject/object relationship *vis a vis* cognition, and similarly, asserts the purpose of thought to be

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12 However, one could argue that its genealogy stretches back further to early rationalists like Descartes and even Kant, but for our present purposes we shall deny this claim and locate its origin Hegel’s legacy.
identical with reality if and only if reality is construed as the Absolute Idea (Lynch, 2001, p. 99). But for our purposes, I will discuss only Brand Blanshard’s more recent version of coherence theory, and then proceed to Hilary Putnam’s reformulation.

**Blanshard’s Theory of Coherence**

The coherence theory of truth put forward by Blanshard is a metaphysical solution to a logical problem. He writes that “reality is a system, completely ordered and fully intelligible, with which thought in its advance is more and more identifying itself” (Blanshard, 1939, p. 263). The telos of thought is to accord with reality, and since reality is an essentially an idea or ideal, it follows that the truth of an idea is its “degree of proximity to the system” (Blanshard, 1939, p. 264). In this way absolute idealism is seen as the solution to the problem of the gap between our ideas and reality. But a major difficulty with Blanshard’s position is that coherence entails an infinite regress: the gap is bridged by abstraction, which itself implies yet another gap between our ideas and other ideas required through mutual support to make a proposition true *ad infinitum*. I shall not dwell on this deficiency any longer than to say that this is one of a long list of objections.13

On a generous reading, Blanshard is offering a robust theory which advances the claim that the universal property shared by truth bearers is verifiability in the sense of continued coherence with other beliefs. A proposition is true if it can be verified by other propositions said to pass muster in some kind of logical internal

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13 Blanshard anticipates other objections such as the entailment of global skepticism and relativism, and also logical inconsistency and circularity. The most common objection *ceteris paribus* is that the coherence theory allows for any proposition to be true, a counter argument first raised by Russell. (cf. Russell, B. (1912). *The problem of philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 123).
audit where verifiability means logical agreement with other currently accepted propositions.

Ideally, the coherence theory contains the following attributes: no arbitrary propositions; every proposition is entailed by others jointly or singly, and; there is complete integration inasmuch as every part is indicative of the whole, and vice versa (Blanshard, 1939, p. 265-266). I think the most significant question about this configurative notion is whether it is possible for a logical system to be fully coherent but not true. For example, National Socialism is arguably a logical system which is internally ‘true’ to a Nazi, but one would be remiss to advocate that on this basis Nazism is true. Blanshard anticipates this kind of objection and rebuts by saying it “misconstrues the theory because it disregards experience completely: coherence theory does not hold that all systems are true, only one, namely itself” (Blanshard, 1939, p. 276). In other words, the coherence theory is the only system that is absolutely true since it is the standard by which all other truths are judged; hence it follows not all systems are true even if they possess the “robust property” of internal coherence.

**Putnam’s Condition and Poisonous Fruit**

But just how coherent must a system be in order to be true? Hilary Putnam takes Blanshard’s thesis and pushes it to its logical conclusion by asserting that a proposition is true when it is rationally acceptable in *ideal* epistemic conditions. He writes that truth is “(idealized) rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences as those experiences are
themselves represented in our belief system" (Putnam, 1981, p. 49). In other words, the nature of truth is such that under ideal conditions, a claim could be justified as true. In this inductivist formulation, truth is “tensed and relative to a person”: it is tensed because truth depends on accuracy of statements alone, and it is relative since truth can be destabilized by future paradigms of acceptability and justification (Putnam, 1981, p. 55).

Putnam’s assertion that truth is the result of idealized rational acceptability is implausible but nevertheless fruitful for teaching philosophy. The implausibility is due to the fact that some propositions are not susceptible to the test of rational acceptability; no matter how ideal the conditions/procedures are, some propositions seem impervious to Putnam’s test. For instance, as soon as one utters a truth bearer that is either too difficult to prove or disprove (e.g. 'The number of grains of sand in Sahara Desert is odd') or if a truth bearer seems intuitively true (e.g. 'It is right to help disoriented seniors back home'), it is patently clear that an ideal epistemic condition is insufficient to obtain truth.

But the fruits from Putnam’s poisonous tree are ripe for the picking in a philosophy class. For example, students are encouraged through philosophical discourse to select from a host of propositions deemed true/false or knowable/unknowable within the context of classroom discussion. Such a practice fosters critical thinking and has a kind of utility germane to the inquiring mind. I concur with Peirce in that “the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought” (Peirce, 1878, p. 38). Students are therefore encouraged to
keep, change, maintain or abandon a belief using rational acceptability as a way to form true beliefs. So in the end, even if Putnam's formulation of the nature of truth is invalid, it is true that the concept of ideal rational acceptability is helpful in teaching philosophy. Furthermore, it is not a far stretch to deduce from this claim another equally significant result, namely: democratization. If students are given the opportunity to assess truth bearers within the coherence model it follows that their individual voices are heard; the democratization of viewpoints emerges when different systems of thought are discussed philosophically in the classroom. But being heard and being right are not mutually inclusive; the above democratization does not imply that if a student’s views are internally coherent they are likewise right irrespective of others. The point here is that Putnam’s formulation engenders educational opportunities for philosophy students to democratically inquire about differing theories of truth and corresponding beliefs.

*Truth as a Basis for Action*

The most formidable opponent to logical abstraction as it relates to the philosophical problem of truth comes from pragmatism. I say this because it continues to debunk traditional dualisms that plague philosophy. Its central themes have been picked up by philosophers from both sides of the analytic/continental divide and have been put to good use. And perhaps most importantly, its anti-
foundational character allows for freedom in a strict sense to be the essence of the philosophic temperament.\textsuperscript{14}

It is the most venerable of American philosophies, perhaps in part because it advances theories that seem a natural fit with the principles of democracy and progress. Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, taken together, formulate what is commonly known as the ‘pragmatic theory of truth’, a view that asserts a close link between truth and human experience (Lynch, 2001, p. 86). The two differ fundamentally in some respects, but generally their differences amount to a difference in emphasis and motivation. At bottom, both agree that truth is a property of human beliefs which obtain via an examination of practical utility. On this general point, however, Peirce differs from James in that a claim might be useless for virtually any practical purpose we have at the moment and still be true; it is its \textit{conceivable} bearing on practice that is relevant, not whether it relates to what is immediately pressing.

On this view, the meaning of truth is to be found in human activity or practice. True beliefs are those that guide truly. Truth bearers are said to be true if and only if they constitute a ‘good’ basis for action. Thus the nature of truth consists in their ability to guide experience. The cash-value of this view – to use the language

\textsuperscript{14}For a radically novel formulation of the nature of truth, see Heidegger, M. (1930). On the essence of truth. \textit{Basic writings from being and time (1927) to the task of thinking (1964)} (1st ed). New York: Harper & Row. Heidegger identifies freedom as the essence of truth. Freedom is “ek-sistent, disclosive letting beings be,” and “the essence of truth is the truth of essence,” such that truth is a happening and thus admits of being known as true. This phenomenological thesis is robust in nature. However, without a comprehensive understanding of Heidegger’s early philosophy – if such a thing is at all possible – it would be a far stretch to connect pragmatism and phenomenology on the grounds that both stress anti-foundational approaches to the nature of truth and therefore meaning in general. Perhaps the connection can be made, at least in part, in the fact that both are the children of post-Kantian, evolutionary (or historical) thought.
of James – is that true beliefs, by definition, are said to be true if they provoke certain actions with desirable results (Horwich, 1999, p. 930). The latter picture is, however, a *misunderstanding* of pragmatism. For pragmatists, meaning comes first and from a proper understanding of meaning comes a clearer understanding of abstract concepts like truth and reality. The pragmatic conception of meaning is used to clarify the meaning of concepts like “truth” and “reality” whose meaning is clarified by use of the pragmatic theory of meaning. As a philosophical school, pragmatism tends to differ from more conventional philosophies which begin with notions such as truth and reality.

Let us return to the distortion of pragmatism that claims that a true belief is true if it causes desirable results, and clarify its meaning via an illustration. A false belief may clearly be acted upon and result in desirable outcomes. I might believe that my house is at risk of fire, resulting in my putting money in the bank, rather than under the mattress, and thereby be saved from having it robbed the next day when robbers break in. Therefore contrarily, even though one attains a desirable result does not make a belief true. Conversely, if I act on the belief that my house is at risk of fire and correspondingly deposit it in a bank, and it is in fact the case that my house burns down in a fire, then things have worked out as claimed and thus helps verify and similarly does not falsify the belief. But there are many ways to test claims in experience, and the above is just one such way; producing desirable results is but one of many ways to truth.

Some problems with the misunderstood view of pragmatism include, but are not limited to relativism and implausibility. In terms of the latter, it is said that the
pragmatist account of truth as the close relationship with utility is problematic (Horwich, 1999 & Kirkham, 1992); and in terms of the former, objections are made as to how judgments in general are known to be ‘useful’ (Lynch, 2001, p. 186). In this context, different people will value different outcomes so a belief that results in valuable outcomes to one, will not to another, hence they will have different opinions about the belief’s truth. I have already addressed the implausibility objection with regards to Putnam and rescued the spirit of his model via its application to teaching, finding that fruitful and democratic discussion emerges. I will address the objection that the pragmatic theory of truth leads to relativism and show that it too can be reconstructed by a thoughtful analysis of its application to education.

**Settling Opinion: Peirce and the Effects of Scientific Inquiry**

Peirce states that a truth bearer is true if it is justified at the end of scientific inquiry. Another way to put it is that for Peirce, a true belief resolves doubt; it is not just a matter of justifying a belief but rather having an adequate or convincing justification and no new doubts. Accordingly, the rule Peirce would have us use in inquiry is that “the particular habit of mind which governs this or that inference may be formulated in a proposition whose truth depends on the validity of the inferences which the habit determines; and such a formula is called a guiding principle of inference” (Peirce, 1877, p. 3). Our beliefs guide that which we desire to know and shape our actions (Peirce, 1877, p. 4). Guiding principles are akin to a prior belief or axiom with the caveat that such beliefs are themselves subject to change.
Consequently, the upshot is that our beliefs are a necessary condition of our actions but not sufficient; it is the “irritation of doubt” that causes us to form, revise and understand our own beliefs (Peirce, 1877, p. 4). Thus, we do not know if we have the truth, only when doubt has been removed. He states that “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by truth” (Peirce, 1878, p. 57). On this view, the truth project – like science – is essentially a matter of understanding how to properly arrive at beliefs that will engender practical results which in turn will improve our intellectual habits; and since there are just as many approaches to a solution as there are questions, it does not matter what method one uses so long as one is sincerely motivated to find the truth since “the results will move steadily together toward a destined centre” (Peirce, 1878, p. 56). That is, if one is really seeking the truth one will adjust one’s method until one arrives there, or at least to improve one’s convergence on it – since one does not necessarily know when one has arrived. The activity of thought is therefore “like the operation of destiny” wherein different persons with different approaches inevitably and simultaneously arrive at a singularly identical conclusion (Peirce, 1878, p. 56).

Peirce is therefore committed to a monistic notion of truth. After long and arduous scientific/experiential investigations, truth is singular and categorical. That said, the truth of a claim is univocal only in a strict sense; there may be a single truth that answers a particular question about an object but there are a virtually infinite number of truths about an object. “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our
conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce, 1878, p. 45). In other words, every conceivable use of an object is included in its meaning. The logical purport of all of this hangs on what one can do with a claim. Meaning is predicated on use, and the uses of an object are virtually infinite. In the end, since we can never observe all conceivable instances (uses) of an object, we are left with inductive truth—however deductive our theories may be.

Nonetheless the same problem that invalidates Putnam’s idealized procedural apparatus required to justify the truth or falsity of a proposition is likewise present in Peirce. That is, it is highly problematic to assert that something like a complete investigation exists, or that even something akin to this makes logical sense (Lynch, 2001, p. 187). But again, the implication to the philosophy of education and teaching philosophy is that it promotes fruitful and democratic exchanges of ideas with the caveat that the inquiry process embedded in these two areas—especially teaching—aims towards provisional results which always seek better and more useful truths.

Fundamentally underpinning Peirce’s notion of truth is the exclusively pragmatic idea that if one knows all of the conceivable effects of an object one has grasped its conceptual meaning, and if this occurs, then “the only effect which real things have is to cause belief” (Peirce, 1878, p. 53). Likewise, what it means in practice to claim that something is ‘real’ is that one can depend on its uses or effects. For example if a piece on a chessboard is said to be a knight then it will truly function as one in the game. Thus, the truth of a truth bearer flows necessarily from its practical effects on human experience; a proposition is true if it engenders a
justified and useful belief that works out in such a way as one would expect it to work in all of its conceivable ways. As mentioned earlier, I think this has enormously positive ramifications for the teaching of philosophy. My only caveat is that it finds its fullest and most profitable expression in James.

**Utility and Pluralism: William James and His Truths**

The main theme in James’ theory of truth boils down to one basic idea: utility. But this idea comes at a high price of the common-sense notion of ‘what works.’ James defines a theory that ‘works’ as,

...something extremely difficult;...(it) must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. It must derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible, and it must lead to some sensible terminus...to ‘work’ means both these things; and the squeeze is so tight that there is little loose play for any hypothesis. Our theories are wedged and controlled as nothing else is (James, 1907, p. 104).

In other words, a belief is wedged in and constrained by prior principles we are not ready to question, but other current beliefs, and by future, experimental results.

The value or utility of a belief is that it gives us a non-self-defeating way of acting; a way of acting that provides continuity between past and future and does not conflict with the present, and; it is on this basis that James asserts that it is ‘true.’

The value of a belief is its effects on a person’s life, and in this way he is no different than Peirce. With regards to beliefs, James asserts that:

...statements and beliefs are thus inertly and statically true only by courtesy: they practically pass for true; but you cannot define what you mean by calling them true without referring to their functional possibilities. These give its whole logical content to that relation to reality on a belief’s part to which the name ‘truth’ is applied, a relation which otherwise remains one of mere coexistence or bare withness (James, 1914, p. 118).
Also, whereas James’ truth theory is relational insofar as beliefs and possibilities are concerned, “pragmatists accept the definition of truth as agreement” (James, 1907, p. 96). The validity of a true claim is the agreement with the idea and its practical consequences. “Agreement thus turns out to be essentially an affair of leading – leading that is useful because it is into quarters that contain objects that are important. True ideas lead us into useful verbal and conceptual quarters...they lead us to consistency, stability and flowing human intercourse” (James, 1907, p. 103).

The emphasis is forward-looking, and not merely backward looking, as in correspondence and coherence theories. However, truth is spoken of in the same way: “the practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us” (James, 1907, p. 98). But here James is in danger of begging the question (x is important to us because it is true, and x is true because it is important to us). However, the more important question is what to make of the implicit presupposition that if an idea has no practical consequence it is meaningless. Peirce would argue that if two ideas possess identical practical effects among all of those that are conceivable they mean the same thing, or if neither truth nor falsehood applies in a given context, the difference is equally meaningless. James would likewise agree (James, 1907, p. 97). Where Peirce and James diverge, however, is a matter of emphasis.

James’ divergence from Peirce comes in the form of relevance and pluralism. In terms of relevance, truth for James is an ongoing process that is malleable to human needs, interests and attitudes; like reality, truth is mutable and can change without rigorous scientific investigation. Peirce would flatly deny this claim.
Additionally, James asserts that “truth for us is singly a collective name for verification processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is made...in the course of experience” (James, 1907, p. 104). It is in virtue of one’s own experience that truth is made, and thus belief not only has a utilitarian aspect (as with Peirce), but a subjective and uniquely personal character as well. Moreover, James’ view is fundamentally pluralistic. It is worth quoting James at length here:

It is quite evident that our obligation to acknowledge truth, so far from being unconditional, is tremendously conditioned. Truth with a big T, and in the singular, claims abstractly to be recognized, of course; but concrete truths in the plural need to be recognized only when their recognition is expedient (James, 1907, p. 111)

Expedience in this context is what is true in the long run. Truth is plastic because the truths we seek or accept depend on various assumptions or simplifications whose import may change. Thus the truth of any truth bearer is conditioned necessarily by historical time and place, and consequently James’ conception of the nature of truth is inherently pluralistic.

*Rescuing Relativism and Pluralism*

The philosophy of education is concerned with what kind of society education should help create. As an ethical enterprise it is concerned with what can (or should) be, and not just with what is. A major concern (albeit implicitly expressed via policy) raised by those in power is that the things learned in school can end up harming society – or more commonly, that what is not learned has bad consequences. Philosophy students are said to be prime examples of people who
can potentially undermine hegemonic power/authority structures that 'keep society intact.' Relativism and pluralism are two central threats to the status quo, and they creep up in almost every modern philosophical discourse about reality and truth. Having said this, James' pragmatic theory is implicitly relativistic and explicitly pluralistic. Therefore James’ theory threatens the status quo (for his part, Peirce's brand of truth is immune to relativism for what is said to be practical is always 'scientifically verifiable', Lynch, 2001, p. 186).

James’ theory is relativistic because truth is defined in terms of its usefulness, and the question then becomes what objective reasons determine when a proposition is useful. I maintain that the problem is exacerbated if one holds that objective reasons or facts exist for if they do, then truth is not determined by utility but rather by objective fact; furthermore, if one were to deny this then truth is determined relative to varying degrees of subjective understandings of what precisely ‘practically useful’ entails. Thus on a generous reading, truth according to James is relativistic.15

And yet, to the student of philosophy, there can be no greater conclusion. In fact, the discussion of divergent theories of truth should be encouraged. For even if different theories of truth coexist in a philosophy classroom, the implication is that different ideals of thinking, learning, knowledge and meaning will result. Hence, the existence of James' theory promotes a wider inclusivity. On the other hand, not every approach to meaning is as good as any other. It is incumbent on philosophy

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15 This view is very similar to Bertrand Russell's objection to James' theory of truth, and the role that 'relation' plays in it. For his response see “Two English Critics”, book XIV in James, W. (1914). The meaning of truth: A sequel to “pragmatism.” New York: Longmans, Green, and co, pp. 146-150.
teachers to mitigate impending classroom discussion disaster by modeling the kind of philosophical temperament that rejects theories that lead one awry. Such pedagogical practice models consideration and inclusion but provides frameworks in which students – by way of critical inquiry – consider the grounds for evaluating different epistemologies in virtue of their ability to yield truth, provisional as it may be. It is precisely this pragmatic spirit that trumps the defects latent in its own notion of truth. Is it not the case that teaching philosophy depends on inter-subjectivity? Do not teachers encourage dialogue in the broad educational sense? It is of no practical use to students if they were encouraged but not taught how to independently determine whether something was true. It is for these reasons that the letter of James’ theory must be abandoned for the spirit which coalesces the virtues of relativity and pluralism for the greater good of inclusivity. The latter are useful instruments to make one believe that education promotes real learning. As James says, “true thoughts mean everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action” (James, 1907, p. 97).

Implications for the Philosophy of Education: Identity, Knowledge and Pedagogy

The philosophical problem of truth necessitates a radical rethinking of the relationship between philosophy and education. Pragmatists essentially wanted to reframe this question, to shift to meaning while making truth a secondary concern since meaning comes first in figuring out what truth means and also comes first in testing truth claims in practice. To this end, are philosophy and education the same thing? If one acknowledges the power of the quest for truth inasmuch as it has the
capability to assist us in our investigations and decision-making processes, then the answer is “yes.” This is because education and philosophy are both intimately connected with and evolve progressively by the accrual of knowledge. Conversely, if one denies that truth says anything meaningful about a proposition, then the answer is “no,” especially if our investigations are not always directed towards the questions of most concern to most people.16

As has been seen in the robust theories, truth and knowledge share a close relationship. But what do philosophers of education mean by knowledge? What is knowledge, and what knowledge counts as worthwhile, and when? In this sense, integrating theories of truth in the philosophy of education is problematic since it may inculcate knowers into hegemonic structures of oppression (Code, 1992 & Harraway, 1988, Thayer-Bacon, 2003). But the problem with this line of reasoning is not precluding truth from philosophy, but rather how the above ‘inculcation’ assumes that truth is set apart from shared inquiry. If truth theory – and more essentially, ‘truth’ itself – is treated as an outcome of social interaction and less as static and dead concepts taken from textbooks that need discarding, then the notion that the theory is tenable is a judgment. And this is precisely what pragmatism stands for, namely: the truth of a claim evolves, and its veracity lies in its ability to guide behaviour appropriately.

The above line of reasoning also entails that if knowledge in the traditional sense of the word is predicated on truth – whether truth in the robust or deflationist

sense – then philosophy of education must concentrate primarily on peripheral areas of knowledge and only treat so-called ‘core areas’ when necessary to draw out genuinely significant questions that address the realities of educators and their students (Kitcher, 2011, p. 249). The proof of this comes from human experience: we tend to learn better when we are learning about what interests us.

This leads us to a discussion of pedagogy. Truth, in the robust sense, asserts a certain universality about the world. The universality was shown to reside in a single explanatory feature that accounts for truth as correspondence, coherence or verifiability. But the question remains whether truth can be dangerous to pedagogy by design or omission. On the one hand, if truth is unequivocally presented as robust or deflationary, then pedagogy amounts to hard science: learners are forced to learn about logical procedure, how and when she should use it and how not to conclude falsely. On this view, learning transforms into instances of quantifiable units of knowledge that are true by virtue of the logical cogitations of a mind whose sole aim is to produce correctness. This kind of pedagogy transforms educators into pedagogues – an unnecessarily strict or pedantic teacher; and likewise, the learner is made to be a receptacle into which discreet units of knowledge are placed uncritically. If on the other hand the philosophical problem of truth is omitted from pedagogy then the omission is dangerous. And yet its omission is potentially

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18 The Derridean concept of ‘erasure’ as applied to feminist epistemology is closely linked to my claim here. There are real hazards to both teachers and students if controversial topics are precluded from
beneficial, something I have already covered with direct reference to Rorty’s claim and its reconstructive implications for the teaching of philosophy. A way around this is, following pragmatism, to recast truth as a provisional judgment that is warranted by evidence and prior truths subsequent to inquiry. In this way truth is a consequence of meaning, not vice-versa.

**Chapter Conclusion**

It does not matter philosophically if there is an essence to truth as far as education is concerned. This was shown via an exploration of the most significant examples of robust theories: correspondence, coherence and pragmatic notions of truth. It was demonstrated that serious objections from both myself and deflationists alike not only served to rescue robust notions from logical inconsistency and more generally irrelevance, but also cast light on significant issues in both the philosophy of education and teaching philosophy. Likewise, there is an inversely proportional relationship between the role and application of truth theories as it relates to teaching philosophy. It was confirmed that a rigorous analysis of the meaning of the question ‘What is truth?’ effects much needed change in philosophical temperament about what educational values are required to promote learning. These values were shown to be provocation, democratization and inclusivity. Similarly, and equally important, is the value that beliefs function as claimed. The upshot here is that truth is necessarily tied to a complex of relations both in the world and individual knower.

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Therefore, the philosophical concern with truth turned out to be in the final analysis a fruitful and provocative discussion about the nature, scope and limitations of both the idea of the nature of truth and its implications for teaching philosophy. The teaching of philosophy is best able to utilize the veracity and usefulness of robust theories and likewise provide students with the critical thinking skills necessary to appreciate deflationist views as well.

Accordingly, now that we have clarified and deflated truth theory as it relates to teaching philosophy, we are now in a better position to discuss another general epistemological area: meaning. I showed that truth led to many divergent and conflicting effects on teaching philosophy, and it remains to be seen if similar results occur in my inquiry into meaning since meaning itself is argued to be relative to different standpoints. The very existence of relativism and the divergent approaches to it in philosophical teaching motivates the subsequent chapter.
III. CHAPTER TWO:

Relativism and the Problem Concerning Teaching Philosophy

Chapter Introduction

The present chapter builds on the previous one inasmuch as truth and meaning are closely linked epistemologically and pedagogically. The logical connection between truth and meaning is strong, and it seems natural to treat both as distinct but related phenomena in philosophical teaching practice. We saw earlier that when a pragmatic attitude is applied to problems in teaching truth theory there are many pedagogical benefits for both teacher and student. The present chapter aims at similar effects in teaching and learning.

The aim of this chapter is to explore whether and to what extent relativism affects the teaching of philosophy. My principle goal is to elucidate the concept of relativism philosophically in order to draw out pedagogical consequences as they apply to teaching. These consequences will in turn provide the basis for a rethinking of what it means to “do” philosophy in an academic setting. In effect, I am concerned with the metaphilosophical and practical implications of what happens when relativism and teaching philosophy intersect. I discuss two kinds of relativism, cognitive and ethical, and extrapolate from them a novel approach to and sound practices for teaching philosophy that culminates in a modified version of relativism. I maintain that although good pedagogy is usually teleological, and that teachers must be amenable to many different ends, openness to relativism presents educators with a practical alternative to achieve their ends. A secondary but equally important aim this chapter paper is to advance a new pedagogical
orientation for educators *vis-à-vis* relativism: that in light of my subsequent analysis it is more important that educators resist proving relativism false to their students and instead provide the conditions in which it is perceived as another philosophical position that will enable them to do philosophy genuinely and sincerely.

**The Concept of Relativism and Its History**

Ironically, the philosophical concept of relativism is *prima facie* ambiguous. It seems intuitive that relativism is the view that there is nothing inherently true or false, good or bad, right or wrong unless it stands in relation to something else. But this does not adequately do justice to the concept. Crispin Wright states that the standard concept of relativism is “a matter of entailment: standard-relative claims are entailed by some sets of propositions articulating relevant general standards, together with collateral information, but not by others” (Wright, 2008, p. 385). Wright means that propositions are relative if they contain some set of shared features. Some philosophers define relativism as the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). Still others argue it is the position that all points of view are all equally valid (Westacott, 2005). It has also been said that relativism is a seductive and captivating concept that does not denote a single doctrine but “a family of views” (Swoyer, 2010). It is believed that relativism relates

19 “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” is a version of relativism espoused by Hamlet. His view is typical of most “student relativists” in that their “relativism” is bound up with an uncritical skeptical attitude. Most philosophical relativists are not, however, entirely skeptical as to whether we can know if there are any valid moral principles. Granted, the concept of relativism includes skeptical views about the nature of epistemic claims, but by this quote I wish merely to point out that the notion of relativism is usually mistaken for the kind of facile subjectivity here espouse by Hamlet. Shakespeare, W., & Wilson, J. D. (1941). *Hamlet*. Cambridge England: University Press.
specifically to cultural norms (Putnam, 1983, p. 235); that it is tantamount to the narrative or descriptive framework of inquiry in which we reason (Rorty, 1991, p. 23); that essentially it is an arbitrary epistemological choice between competing theories (Popper, 1963, p. 369); that it is a reflection of absolute epistemic incommensurability (Bernstein, 1985, p. 11-12), and; that relativism is the name we give to the state of affairs that obtains when neither objectivity nor uniqueness is present in matters of fact or ideas (Gellner, 1985, p. 84).

In anticipation of what some critics cite as a major cause for concern for cognitive relativism, the above ambiguity undermines the veracity and usefulness of the concept since relativism so defined is implausible and incoherent. This is because it seems implausible that all definitions of relativism will work together to produce a coherent concept with which philosophers can work. However, if we consider relativism's historical roots it becomes clear what relativism should mean, and how it can be of use to philosophy teachers.

**Plato's Theatetus and Protagoras' 'Measure Doctrine'**

Protagoras is credited as having articulated the clearest definition of relativism. Socrates summarizes Protagoras (whose text *Truth* is lost to history) in Plato's *Theatetus* as having asserted that “man is the measure of all things – of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not” (Plato, 1997, p. 189).

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21 Plato. *Theatetus, 170a-171d.*
This has come to be known as the ‘Measure Doctrine’ (MD). Plato then links this to Heraclitus and concludes that on this basis knowledge is individual perception, which of course Plato flatly denies. The issue here is that Protagoras is claiming that all statements are true or false relative to the person who utters them, raising problems why they disagree. When we expand the MD beyond the individual, statements are considered true or false relative to the context in which they are uttered, e.g., culture, situation or epoch, raising problems because knowledge and ethics cease to have firm objective foundations; relativism relativizes the meaning of all things so that they are contingent to the norms of social groups. From what has been said, therefore, relativism (R) will henceforth mean the denial that there are certain kinds of universal, objective and foundational truths upon which our beliefs – epistemic or ethical – are based.

For the purposes of teaching philosophy, relativism denotes an anti-foundational position. Notwithstanding the incoherence charge leveled against the concept of relativism, the above formulation of relativism, R, obtains because it satisfies two general characteristics most philosophers agree to be central to all versions of relativism, namely: 1. They all assert that one thing, e.g., moral values, aesthetic taste, meaning, knowledge, is relative to some particular standpoint or framework, e.g., the individual subject, a culture, an era, a language, a conceptual scheme, and 2. They all deny that any standpoint is uniquely privileged over others (Westacott, 2005).

\[22\] A scathing – but nonetheless unconvincing – response to the claim that Socrates refutes Protagorean relativism is put forward by Castagnoli, L. (2004). Protagoras refuted: How clever is socrates' "most clever" argument at theaetetus 171a–c?’. Topoi, 23(1), 3-32.
So what does this mean to the teaching of philosophy? For now it means that relativism is a philosophical position to be learned and explored through epistemological and ethical applications. Later I will discuss the phenomena of ‘student relativism’ (SR) and its corresponding implications for teaching philosophy. I will also explore the extent to which SR is not a philosophical position at all. But for the present moment, I shall only advance the following claim: that relativism is tenable if and only if it is presented as one philosophical position among many, not a position that should be accepted or denied. That relativism is false is not a matter of pedagogical importance; what matters is that it is used instrumentally for educative ends.

**Cognitive Relativism: A General Outline**

The genus relativism admits of two kinds, cognitive and ethical. The former is the position that “there are no universal truths about the world: the world has no intrinsic characteristics, there are just different ways of interpreting it” (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). On this description, cognitive relativism (CR) entails that truth is relative to frameworks or conceptual schemes. Since ‘truth’ is implicated in the latter description, it follows that knowledge, belief and justification are also relative because of their inexorable connection to truth.\(^{23}\) Consequently, CR implies an ‘all or nothing’ dichotomy that has the following logical form: either something is true relative to something else, or it is not, and since it is impossible to escape the

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\(^{23}\) One wonders what logical and epistemological consequences this position would have to the long-held belief that knowledge is justified true belief. I believe it would render all semantic and linguistic import meaningless. The basis of this traditional philosophical view is to be found in Gettier, E. L. (1963). *Is justified true belief knowledge? Analysis, 23*(6), 121-123.
relational character of all thinking-knowing-believing it is therefore true that truth is relative. Accordingly, if truth is relative to an individual, we get a species of epistemic subjectivism; if it is relative to a group or culture, we get social or cultural relativism; if it is relative to time and place, we get situational or historical relativism.

**A Natural Fit: An Argument for Cognitive Relativism**

One argument in favour of CR is that it accurately reflects the nature of truth. It must be noted that CR presupposes the validity of the coherence theory of truth. On this view, the property that makes a proposition true is verifiability and consistency; something is true if it coheres with other statements that are themselves said to be true or obtained via warranted assertion or ideal epistemic conditions.\(^{24}\) Even if false propositions enter into a complex set of coherent statements, relativist philosophers like Joseph Margolis (1982) argue that CR is salvageable since even falsities fit neatly into the actual practice of adjudicating between ideas and thus provides a model for epistemological determination between propositions (Margolis, 1982, p. 92). Margolis extends his brand of CR to *interpretation* in that relativism is seen to account for and fit into linguistic and evidentiary practices in general (Margolis, 2000, p. 215).

Rorty (1991) holds a similar view: CR replaces any privileged (metaphysical) standpoint from which what we say, and how we account for it is determined. The latter determination is in practice nothing more than of a kind of narrative or

\(^{24}\)The genesis of this widely-held and modified theory of truth is to be found in Blanshard, B. (1939). *The nature of thought*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
description of our justification process, and Rorty asserts that this process is just as arbitrary (relative) as any other that preceded it. Take, for example, his views on objectivity and standards: “All we philosophers can do when asked for standards or methods of disinterested objective inquiry is to describe how the people we most admire conduct their inquiries. We have no independent information about how objective truth is to be obtained” (Rorty, 1991, p. 71). This ‘description’ is arbitrary insofar as its merit is relative to the person evaluating it. Rorty asserts that contrary to popular belief pragmatists such as himself never claimed that “there was no such thing as objective truth and validity. What we say is that you gain nothing for the pursuit of such truth by talking about the mind dependence or mind independence of reality. All there is to talk about are the procedures we use for bringing about agreement among inquirers” (Rorty, 1991, p. 72). This is the heart of Rorty’s version of relativism.

Correspondingly, Garcia argues that not all kinds of interpretations are relativistic, although all interpretations are relative, and that even those interpretations that are relativistic are not so in the same ways (Garcia, 2000, p. 60). Other brands of CR abound in contemporary philosophy, especially in analytic circles. Most are in response to Putnam’s internal realism (Field, 1982; Johnson, 1991; Throop, 1989; Weckhert, 1984), even though Putnam (1983) himself repudiates CR to advance his own brand of epistemology that is loosely based on the central tenants of relativism and pragmatism.
Self-Refutation and Incoherence: Objections to Cognitive Relativism

There are numerous objections to CR but the most compelling has its roots in Plato and has been developed by contemporary philosophers who wish to leverage their critiques against the strong version of cognitive relativism. It will be shown that the latter collapses in on itself in light of the forthcoming discussion, but nonetheless, a weak version of CR will emerge as vital to teaching philosophy.

The first objection to CR is that it is self-refuting and thus incoherent. That is, CR is said to be “self-referentially incoherent because it presents its statements as universally true, rather than relatively so” while asserting that all claims are relative (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). In other words, the truth of relativism implies its own falsehood. For example, if \( x \) is true (e.g., CR is correct) relative to perspective \( a \) (e.g., Jane believes \( x \)), but false to perspective \( b \) (e.g., John believes not-\( x \)), then \( x \) is both true and false; and since this is a contradiction, the thesis that \( x \) is true is false, and vice-versa. Hence the meta-claim that all beliefs are relative is incoherent since that claim is not stated as though it is relative. So the Achilles’ heel of relativism turns out to be truth (Swoyer, 2010). But this begs the question: Why would anyone endorse a position that is so easily shown to be incoherent?25 This line of reasoning stretches back to the Theatetus where Socrates argues 171a-c: that either the proposition that truth is relative is true absolutely or it is true only insofar as it is relative to some standpoint, reference, framework, individual, etc. If it is true absolutely, then there exists at least one proposition that is true irrespective of a standpoint, namely the proposition itself, so Protagoras’s claim that “man is the

\[ \text{footnote} 25 \text{In response, the relativist can deny that she is engaging in the act of defending the truth of relativism, and add that relativists may have other purposes in mind when arguing for their position.} \]
measure of all things” is inconsistent (Plato, 1997, p. 190-191).26 To be charitable, we may allow the relativist one preferential exception that may salvage CR in light of Plato’s objection: that there is at least one proposition that is true (i.e., CR is true) in a non-relative manner. However, the problem arises that in order to justify CR we have not only broken the law of non-contradiction, but we have no reason to stop there since on the basis of our exception myriad exceptions must be made, creating an infinite regress of qualifying exceptions. If the relativist’s claim is that CR is true to her standpoint, but must admit that it may be false relative to a competing standpoint – *ad infinitum* – then why should we bother with her claim to begin with? Thus even if we are charitable with CR it collapses in on itself in a self-refuting and contradictory manner.

Harvey Siegel (1998) claims that the problem of incoherence rests on the fact that “relativism precludes the possibility of determining the truth, justificatory status, or, more generally, the epistemic merit of contentious claims and theses – including itself – since according to relativism no claim or thesis can fail any test of epistemic adequacy or be judged unjustified or false” (Siegel, 1998, p. 35). That is, if relativism is true, then the *nature of truth* is undermined because the latter precludes contradiction; but since according to relativism there are no objective or privileged standards27 by which a statement is said to be true except if it stands in relation to something else, it is possible that one and the same belief can be true in

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26 This is generally what has come to be known as the critique of the ‘strong-version’ of truth-value relativism.

one context and false in another; and since what applies to the parts (i.e., in terms of coherence) must also apply to the whole, if relativism is true, it is false, and hence relativism is false.

Another way that CR is said to be self-refuting or incoherent rests on the claim that it must appeal to objective standards to be true. If relativism is correct, it must have strong justification. And since it is the case that justification requires good reasons to support a conclusion, and since most agree that what makes a reason ‘good’ is that it has wide-ranging rather than contingent or subjective appeal, it would seem that a good reason is tantamount to an objective reason. Therefore, if CR is true it can only be true if it appeals to some non-arbitrary, neutral or absolute ground like one found in a ‘good’ reason; but since the latter is prohibited by CR it must be incorrect, or put another way, if CR is true it is false, and thus CR is false (Siegel, 1982, p. 49).

**The Pedagogical Import of Cognitive Relativism**

I will consider a second objection to CR – that it leads to philosophically disastrous implications – when I discuss ethical relativism (ER) later in this chapter. For now I only state that this objection centres on the idea that an uncritical commitment for or against relativism undermines genuine philosophizing. This objection will support my arguments that aim to revitalize teaching philosophy.

For the purposes of teaching philosophy the minutiae over which contemporary philosophers argue in CR discussions are of little relevance. That one
can even make sense of much of the discussion without specialized training in analytic philosophy is disputable. Of course, just because something is difficult does not preclude it from being important. CR may be unprofitable to teach exhaustively and students better off understanding the main ideas and learning how to apply them to particular epistemological scenarios. This is due in large part because CR is more of a set of abstract epistemological parameters by which cognitive problems are understood; accordingly, it behooves philosophy teachers to flesh out this skeleton with actual issues from both forms of life\(^29\) and the history of philosophy. In these ways CR is made relevant to students because the goal of CR is to understand what and how we know things; therefore, as an instrumental tool to achieve this pedagogical end, CR is relevant to teachers and students alike. Philosophical claims must be considered in context and therefore teaching this point to students abstractly is not nearly as useful as considering claims in context.

Another pedagogical import of CR is that CR is impractical to teach exclusively. With respect to time, there are insufficient class hours in an academic term to cover minutiae; with respect to difficulty, there is hardly any reason to believe that anyone but a trained professor could decipher such material; with respect to engagement, one would be hard-pressed to convince students that CR discussions are interesting, and finally; with respect to relevance, since most

\(^{29}\) By appealing to Deweyean theories of democracy – most notably in the project of objective consensus building – some argue that this can be done by using pragmatism as an alternative to relativism by appealing to certain norms of empirical experimentation. For an interesting discussion of this view see Hildebrand, D. L. (2011). Pragmatic democracy: Inquiry, objectivity, and experience. *Metaphilosophy, 42*(5), 589-604.
Philosophers find CR largely untenable\textsuperscript{30}, so would their students, and consequently teaching the finer details of CR to secondary school and undergraduate philosophy students is highly irrelevant to their lives. These reasons all point to one main claim: that practicality and applicability are \textit{conditio sine qua non} of teaching philosophy.\textsuperscript{31} On this view, therefore, CR must be taught as a philosophical position that can be attacked and defended, but solely for instrumental purposes.

**Perspective and Privilege: The Concept of Ethical Relativism**

Thus far we have considered two kinds of relativism – cognitive and ethical – and now we will shift to the second type. Ethical relativism (ER) is the position that there are no universally valid moral principles, where “universal” means, presumably, agreed upon by all people and not applicable to all members of the relevant population. Furthermore, ER asserts that all moral principles are equally valid relative to culture or individual choice (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). The general doctrine of relativism is to be found in its ethical version insofar as moral judgments are true or false relative to a particular perspective, with the additional caveat that no perspective is privileged over others (Westacott, 2010). Thus, what is true or

\textsuperscript{30}A typical view is that relativistic properties are arbitrarily true since \textit{esse est conципi}: for a relativistic (especially ethical) property to exist it merely needs to be thought by an individual within a particular framework. The consequence of this is a sort of “frictionless” discourse wherein relative differences in beliefs are all accepted as genuine without critical analysis. For a more complete discussion of this view see Preston, J. (1995). Frictionless philosophy: Paul Feyerabend and relativism. \textit{History of European Ideas}, 20(4-6), 963-968.

false morally for one person can be true or false to another person who adopts a different standpoint.\footnote{In this vein, an uncritical proponent of ER could say things like, "Who's to say what's right or wrong?", "What's right for me may not be right for you," "That's just your opinion, and your opinion is no better than anyone else's," and "What's right for me is whatever I think, feel or believe is right for me." All of the above are reminiscent of student relativism, a phenomenon I shall treat at length later in my paper.}

There are two sub-types of ER, conventionalism (CER) and subjectivism (SER). CER is the position that moral principles are valid relative to the conventions of a given culture or society, whereas SER states that individual choices determine the validity of a moral principle (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). It is important to note that for our pragmatic purposes neither seems to involve testing or experiment as a way of validating claims. This is vital as it will be shown that ER requires that inquiry plays a significant role in determining the consequences relativistic claims have on other beliefs we hold. Today, most philosophers agree that CER has two distinct theses: diversity and dependency. The diversity thesis states that what is ethically accepted as right/wrong \textit{varies} between societies and therefore proves that there are no moral principles acknowledged by all societies. CER so construed is essentially anthropological or historical, and philosophers call this position 'cultural relativism'. The dependency thesis claims that all moral principles derive their validity from cultural \textit{acceptance}; a moral principle is 'right' depending on what a given society accepts as right. Therefore, “because of the diversity and dependency theses, relativists conclude that there are no universally valid moral principles applying everywhere and at all times,” (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). Again, we must note that pragmatists would deny such notions since the above precludes
experimentation; nowhere does it follow from the above that certain moral claims can be tested as to what consequences they have, and whether and to what extent they may enhance or undermine our ethical beliefs we currently hold. If we ask such questions, ER (as with all ethical positions) becomes subject to empirical analysis as the answers will result in matters of fact. These facts will in turn invalidate or validate an ethical assertion, thus making ethical discussion empirical.

**Objectivity Explained (away) and Tolerance: Arguments for Ethical Relativism**

One argument that is used to defend ER is that objectivity and/or realism does not exist in a factual sense. Because of challenges by philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Foucault, the idea of objectivity has been under assault for a very long time (e.g., by Sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras). But let us assume that factual objectivity – objectivity being defined as that which is supportable by evidence that is available to everyone – is true. Under what conditions is this the case?

Usually, when people disagree whether something is factually true an appeal is made to another independent fact for corroboration. For example, Jane believes that Columbus discovered America in 1490 and John says it occurred in 1475. This disagreement is easily resolved by appealing to historical research. But the question then becomes: On what basis is the historical research correct? Or more generally,

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33 It is a common belief that because the Sophists employed eristics rather than genuine and sincere dialogical practices, they were essentially relativists. For the opposite view, see Bett, R. (1989). The sophists and relativism. *Phronesis, 34*(2), pp. 139-169. Similarly, for a discussion of the tension between eristics and *diairesis* (distinction-making) and its implication to teaching philosophy, see Corey, D. (2008). Prodicus: Diplomat, sophist and teacher of Socrates. *History of political thought, 29* (1), pp. 1-26.
what do we mean by ‘facts’ and how are they known? Thus notions of legitimacy, authenticity, and correctness come in to play. In this case, yet another appeal to yet another fact or set of facts to corroborate the truth is required. We see where this goes: factual disagreement continues \textit{ad infinitum} and thus the truth of even the most innocuous historical proposition may imply an infinite regress.

But surely this is merely academic; when we say that Columbus discovered America in 1492 we objectively \textit{mean} it; but not so with moral disagreements. For example, if Barbara believes that abortion is morally justified but Lisa believes that it is an act of murder, on what basis can this disagreement be resolved? Both Barbara and Lisa would certainly be remiss if they did not support their beliefs as consistent with their particular standpoints. So now we have two moral agents with two mutually exclusive sets of moral facts with no plausible way to reconcile their views. It must be argued in terms of moral facts, therefore, that “some parties simply cannot appreciate...possible improvements in evidence. Some moral facts, the realist must contend, are simply inaccessible” (Capps, Lynch, Massey, 2009, p. 414). Hence, even a charitable reading of objectivity renders the concept problematic. If this is true, then ER obtains since it circumvents moral factual disagreement via appeals to multiple ethical standpoints. And so, following Harman, “the most basic philosophical issue about fact and value arises from the observation that human morality and evaluation \textit{seem} to depend on one or another set of standards in a way that rationality does not” (Harman, 1982, p. 570). The pragmatic rejoinder to this is that the moral goodness of a claim can be investigated and tested experimentally in practice. That is, when we speak of objective reasons for moral
actions pragmatically, we may ask: ‘What difference to practice and to ethical
close conduct would it make if moral belief x is true?’ Similarly, we can ask: ‘What
consequence will there be to my other ethical positions if moral belief x is the case?’
The evidentiary burden on the moral agent is heavy but not unbearable; it is heavy
since now instead of heady and transcendent abstractions, concrete cases are
required to think through ethical problems relating to ER, and; it is likewise
bearable because not all issues permit of instant solutions but rather careful
examination of relevant empirical phenomena.

Another argument in support of ER is that it promotes tolerance. The main
presupposition here is that tolerance causes individual humility, and that critical
self-awareness is constitutive of said humility. That is, when one situates one’s
ethical beliefs in a global context it renders the individual’s moral principles on par
with others. Disparate ethical views no longer conflict, clash or culminate in
loggerheads but rather harmonize and reflect a greater diversity of ethical
perspectives. Hence, following Wong (2006), when this happens the individual
becomes cognizant that one’s ethical beliefs are part of a greater whole of views;
consequently, the individual is compelled into a state of tolerance in the face of such
ethical pluralism.

Unacceptability and Intolerance: Objections to Ethical Relativism

Both of the most compelling objections to ER hinge on what one means by the word
‘reasonable.’ Of course, what is reasonable to a relativist turns on what standpoint
she endorses. I will not take a position on this point but rather assert that what is
reasonable is what works in a given scenario. For our purposes, ‘reasonable’ is thus understood pragmatically and by extension, instrumentally.\(^{34}\) I will link this idea to teaching philosophy when student relativism (SR) is discussed in greater detail, but for now, I shall cover the two most damaging lines of attack on ER, starting with the argument from intolerance.

To some degree, relativism implies an, ‘anything goes,’ attitude, and thus in terms of ER, one must tolerate all moral positions as equally arbitrary. But this seems to run against common sense since surely there are moral positions that one must not tolerate.\(^{35}\) For example, the practice of rape and child soldiering as tactics of psychological warfare is a common occurrence in parts of the developing world where ethnic civil war takes place. On the basis of ER, one cannot pass judgment on such actions, nor can one legitimately claim that it should be judged outside the context of that culture. But it was stated earlier that since tolerance is a natural derivative of relativism it is a major argument in favour of ER. However, the argument from tolerance falls due to the following three lines of attack: 1. Tolerance is not equivalent to respect, 2. Ethical relativists inconsistently posit a principle of tolerance as a universal obligation, and 3. The principle of tolerance is misguided because not every belief should be tolerated (Westacott, 2012). (1) implies a

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\(^{34}\) Some philosophers have attempted to highlight how aspects of classic pragmatism support relativism in a ‘qualified’, openly feminist, sense. The latter is said to be the foundation of a renewed version of what can be considered ‘reasonable’. For the full discussion of this view, see Thayer-Bacon, B. (2003). Pragmatism and feminism as qualified relativism. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 22*(6), 417-438.

\(^{35}\) A modified relativism is advanced by Frieda Heyting in order to revitalize the philosophical notion of critique. This notion may in fact be useful to philosophers concerned with the limits of tolerance because it claims, among other things, that tolerance is a matter of consensus and contextualization, not absolute entailment. Heyting, F. (2004). Relativism and the critical potential of philosophy of education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 38*(3), 493-510. For a critique of this view see Green, J. (2004). Critique, contextualism and consensus. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 38*(3), 511-525.
watering down of the concept of tolerance since one faithful to the spirit of ER does not critique beliefs from another individual or culture but simply 'tolerates' it uncritically. (2) suggests a logical inconsistency because tolerance is advanced as a universal, non-arbitrary value inherent in the particular, arbitrary concept of relativism. Lastly, (3) implies the seemingly illogical position that a reasonable individual must tolerate egregious beliefs and actions for no other reason than that the doctrine of ER demands it.

Pragmatically speaking, the true test case here is how one treats intolerant beliefs, i.e., persons who do not reciprocate in tolerating others. In other words, what effects occur if one must tolerate such individuals or groups? Correspondingly, what habits of action would/must change in an individual who is usually tolerant but whose moral compass resists tolerating the intolerant? If the tolerant moral agent's actions do not change as a result of continuing to tolerate (or vice-versa) the intolerant, what effect does it have on her moral agency? Thus as with CR and relativism in general, so too with ER and tolerance in particular: tolerance "provides the grounds of its own falsity, and it does this by entailing a proposition which falsifies itself in being self-referring" (White, 1989, p. 90).

Tolerance is thus a logical and ethical vice because it is contradictory and entails non-intuitive moral consequences. But the most damaging rejoinder comes from pragmatism in that tolerance thus described leads to misguided habit. That is, if one tolerates all approaches as equally good then one has no grounds for ruling any of them out, including those that are intolerant of others. In effect, one ends up undermining one's own aims as one has adopted a self-defeating approach.
The second objection proceeds naturally from the first. If one accepts ER, one is committed to the view that all ethical frameworks and moral actions must be accepted as valid. This is because relativism demands that all moral principles are true – and hence justified – relative to some particular standpoint. If the latter is correct, then there are no ethical principles that are morally wrong in an objective sense; an ethical relativist must view patently clear moral wrongdoings as acceptable. Arguably, the only way out of this objection is to situate the wrongdoing within the context of the particular framework from which it arose and assess its normative import on that basis.36 Take the example of murder: most if not all human societies condemn the act of killing, but in the case of war the killing of another individual is justified because it helps achieve heteronomous ends such as halting the advance of the enemy, rooting out saboteurs, winning the war, etc. In this case, killing is justified because within the conceptual-ethical framework of war killing is not only permissible but encouraged and thus ethically justified. It is ethically justified because one’s conduct in war is judged virtuous to the extent that one’s conduct promotes the ends of the war itself. And if killing achieves these ends, one is acting virtuously; hence killing in war is ethically justifiable. But a quick *reductio ad absurdum* shows that if a soldier refrains from killing within the context

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36 Rorty’s *ethnocentrism* is a corollary to this view in that humans cannot appeal to an objective standard except those set out by the standards of their own justificatory framework. Rorty states that “one consequence of antirepresentationalism is the recognition that no description of how things are from a God’s-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were. Our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional.” Rorty, R. (1991). *Philosophical papers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 13.
of war, he is deemed to have acted unethically. This, then, shows the absurdity of ER on the basis that it commits one to hold beliefs that are demonstrably unreasonable.

The Pedagogical Import of Ethical Relativism

In terms of pedagogy – and thus to the teaching of philosophy – we see redeemable features of ER and are thus in a position to make relevant observations about the practice of teaching philosophy. Wringe (2000) argues that moral education must recognize ethical conflicts as the basis for necessary discussions with students about tolerance. Katayama (2003) asserts that because moral pluralism necessitates tolerance this is a sufficient reason for the inclusion of virtue ethics in moral education. Mason (2001) states that principles of respect for the dignity of persons are tied inexorably to educational values that permit relativistic themes, and the acceptance of responsibility for holding such values is paramount. Moving from the micro to the macro level of education, Molnar (2001) claims that tolerance should be systemic and structural; to shape a society with a stronger moral foundation, schools must see the need to improve the social ethic, not just individual moral behaviour. The latter is a version of trickle-down ethics, i.e., if the educational system is moral it will filter down to its students and hence make them better moral agents.

I mentioned earlier that one of the main objections to CR is that it leads to philosophically disastrous consequences: that the uncritical commitment for or against relativism undermines genuine and sincere philosophizing. I will proceed to link this objection to another important feature of the pedagogical import of ER.
Now, the aforementioned consequence is that a commitment to relativism is thought to be a commitment to intellectual malaise, to a kind of uncritical acceptance of myriad perspectives from multiple standpoints without any epistemic guarantee—that one, some or most beliefs are valid. This in turn leads to two species of nihilism: epistemic (nothing can really be known and hence we can be nihilistic about truth claims), and ethical (there are no valid moral principles) (Pojman, 1999, p. 790). The pedagogical upshot is that philosophy teachers can turn the tables on ER and encourage students to think and discuss critically the aforementioned versions of nihilism. This dialogical technique is inherently good teaching: when teaching is philosophical it is educative, and when philosophy can teach a greater value or insight, teaching becomes educational. Thus, the instrumental value of ER is that a peritrope can be used to foster critical thinking about relativism, which is a good teaching practice.

**Good Pedagogy is Future-Oriented and Teleological**

Perhaps by now it is a truism that the aim of all effective teachers is educate students while they are in class, improve their learning, and provide the tools that will enable them to continue learning even better when they leave. In this sense, good pedagogy is future-oriented and teleological. It is future-oriented because teaching furnishes the students of today with tools that will enable them to think critically tomorrow. Such tools include, but are not limited to: recognition (recognizing ethical issues), finesse (applies tolerance adroitly), identification (locating and respecting individuality and difference), and critique (sincerely
engaging relativism). Good pedagogy is likewise teleological because pedagogy is rooted in ends and goals, the most important of which are educating students and helping them reach their intellectual and moral potentials. These assertions are couched in the presupposition that careful planning can facilitate meaningful instruction. Another presupposition here is that philosophy is ideally situated to promote meaningful opportunities for students to grow intellectually and morally.\textsuperscript{37} But what occurs when all the planning and opportunity in the world comes face to face with a student relativist? The collision between relativism and teaching philosophy – that is, between a teacher aiming at certain outcomes such as growing students intellectually and morally, and a student who believes these outcomes not justifiable – is now apparent, and so I will presently discuss the pedagogical consequences to teaching philosophy in light of this clash.

\textbf{Undermining Genuine Philosophy: The Problem of Student Relativism}

There is a growing body of literature in the philosophy of education about student relativism (SR), and the latter’s continued existence is proof that philosophy teachers are faced with a serious problem. SR is a loosely collected set of negative intellectual attributes that describe a student who believes that relativism is absolutely true, and on this basis feels no need to venture sincerely into discussions

\textsuperscript{37} Although most if not all disciplines in the Social-Sciences and Humanities would dispute it, I believe the philosophy classroom is a necessary precondition for the examination, interpretation, critique and defense of ethical theories. In this way students may develop intellectually and morally. With this, I am in line with Birsch (1992) who states that a philosophical treatment of the fact/value problem (when we try to justify why someone chooses one ethically significant course of action over another) overrides SR and may even lead them to understand how people project values on the neutral world of facts, and what ethical theories and implications are available to assess their validity. Birsch, D. (1992). Using the Fact/Value problem to teach ethical theory. \textit{Teaching Philosophy}, 15(3), 217.
about ethics. SR is therefore anti-intellectual and is not a philosophical position but rather a posture of intellectual malaise that inhibits genuine and sincere philosophizing.\textsuperscript{38}

SR undermines genuine philosophic discourse and hence threatens good teaching practice. Talbot defines SR as a generic kind of student who holds implicitly or explicitly one, some or all of the main tenets of relativism and concludes that there is no sense arguing about ethical issues because “all is relative!” (Talbot, 2012, p. 171). Satris claims it is a non-discursive posture that is more like a psychological defensive mechanism which protects oneself from actually justifying one’s ethical beliefs and/or protecting one from apparently irresolvable conflict (Satris, 1986, p. 197). Carson cites SR as the strange situation in which students enter the classroom unwilling to rationally assess, criticize and justify moral beliefs (Carson, 1999, p. 161). It is also suggested that SR is mainly “just a jumble of confusion, an incoherent set of ramblings with no purpose other than to fill a void – of conversation, of thinking – with words” (Momeyer, 1995, p. 303). SR is said to have two central features: on the one hand it promotes the idea of universal tolerance, but on the other hand it paradoxically maintains the notion of a private dogmatism (Mostert, 1986, p. 201). Therefore, it is clear that SR is a position that undermines all ethical and hence philosophical discourse by preventing and

\textsuperscript{38} Some philosophers take a more psychological approach to SR in that it is linked to the idea of developmental stages. The central claim here is that SR is a natural by-product of a young person’s need to separate from parental authority and forge a new, independent identity. Kaplan, L. D. (2000). Engaging with student relativism: Using heidegger and percy to address student developmental issues. \textit{Teaching Philosophy, 23}(3), 231-240
inhibiting genuine dialogical classroom practice. SR is “rather like an intellectual black hole” (Satris, 1986, p. 198).

**Engaging Student Relativists: Teaching Philosophy in Light of Relativism**

Since SR is a serious problem to philosophy teachers, and since it is not a philosophical position *per se*, although it poses as one, no amount of intellectual correction will solve it. I assert, following Satris (1986), that SR is fundamentally misdiagnosed by philosophy teachers as a philosophical position, and that it is a failure of the student’s will as much as the intellect (Satris, 1986, p. 199).

Consequently, philosophy teachers must not try to invalidate SR via logical procedure or corrective technical analysis of particular cases of SR, but rather foster *habits* of critical thought. The latter is accomplished by moving away from saying to showing: “Instead of claiming or arguing that SR is not a true view, one shows (or induces the experience of) its inappropriateness and unacceptability” (Satris, 1986, p. 203). That is, SR is *deflated* when teachers demonstrate via practical application and incorporation of philosophical problems in CR and ER that not all solutions are equally tenable. Again, good teaching is philosophical and the habitual practice of genuine and thorough philosophical analysis that is charitable to all views provides an effective learning model for students. Therefore, teaching philosophy charitably by showing rather than telling gives students an alternative to SR; it teaches them another way to approach problems in relativism, and models comportment that is demonstrably ‘philosophical’.
But we must ask: where is the inquiry in all of this? And, to what extent does pragmatism come to bear on the issue of teacher modeling as an alternative to SR? There is no better *via media* through ethical problems than through the vehicle of the ‘thought experiment.’ Of particular interest to philosophers teaching ethics are: Plato's *Ring of Gyges*, Nozick’s *Experience Machine* and Thomson’s *Trolley Problem*. With regards to applied ethics, teachers may turn to: Regan’s *Lifeboat*, Thompson’s *Violinist*, and Tucker’s *The Prisoner’s Dilemma*. Even though these experiments are abstract in nature, their content has actual connections to the world. The modeling comes in the form of teacher-led discussions that guide students philosophically through the ethical minefields of these experiments. The dialogical processes that philosophy teachers use should for the most part take on the form of interrogative rather than declarative prompts so students can inquire critically for themselves what the significant issues are, and what conceivable effects they might have on their current habits and ways of living. Hence students are given abstract cases in the concrete, and the philosophy classroom becomes a social-science laboratory in which moral dilemmas with the ethical concepts and theories that underwrite them are tested empirically. Lively topics such as but not limited to: euthanasia, abortion, murder, animal rights, the morality of war and torture are excellent access points for ethical inquiry since there exists such a vast amount of historical and current case studies to draw them out. The results of these tests are tantamount to the

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39 These particular examples, along with a host of other philosophical thought experiments categorized under the headings of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, personal identity, philosophy of language, epistemology, logic, ethics, social and political philosophy and aesthetics can be found in the useful text Tittle, P. (2005). *What if... : Collected thought experiments in philosophy*. New York: Pearson/Longman.
possible and conceivable effects a moral action may have under certain circumstances or theoretical constraints. In this fashion, pragmatism turns relativism in the form of SR on its head and transforms its analysis thereof into an inquiry-based model; ethics becomes an empirical enterprise not unlike epistemology.

In a similar vein but following Talbot (2012), I propose that relativism should be embraced rather than argued against. This means that the pedagogy of teaching philosophy must submit to one of the central features of relativism, namely: tolerance. Talbot argues that teachers must “not try to convince students that moral relativism is false. Instead, show them that even moral relativists should engage in ethics in the ways we teach our classrooms” (Talbot, 2012, p. 175). This method is achieved by “remaining agonistic40 about relativism, at least insofar as one presents oneself to students, or treating it as a view that people can reasonably disagree about” (Talbot, 2012, p. 175). Therefore, the embrace of relativism is not equivalent to denying it; rather, by embracing relativism as a philosophical position to analyze and discuss, SR is once again deflated because this act of acceptance provides a learning model for student relativists to adopt and consequently, a way to understand that SR is not a position at all but only the disingenuous pretence of one.

In light of these new orientations, philosophy teachers can apply not only the redeemable qualities of CR and ER, but also deal with SR directly. In effect, together they amount to a modified version of relativism. This is because the orientations,

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consequences, import and strategies are meaningful in terms of their utility relative to the particular teaching framework in which they consist. Accordingly, there are some very practical teaching strategies that address SR. One cluster of strategies\(^\text{41}\) that a philosophy teacher can use is: 1. Presume the best (i.e., teach as though students are genuinely skeptical about cognitive and ethical issues; teachers must act charitably in the face of SR), 2. Let students be teachers (i.e., allow students to “do” philosophy in small groups wherein they critique and defend positions), 3. Discuss SR as a social phenomenon (i.e., encourage students to analyze relativism’s impact on society and/or how society stands to gain from endorsing relativistic positions), 4. Practice advocacy (i.e., teachers must role model the arts and techniques of a charitable, logical, fair and open-minded philosopher; it also means that teachers may endorse a philosophical position and be willing to argue for and defend criticisms against it)\(^\text{42}\), 5. Take on SR directly (i.e. use bold techniques as required by the situation in which SR emerges via direct student engagement about beliefs, values, and argumentation), and 6. Get on with doing moral reasoning (i.e., replace rather than refute SR claims and also allow for student errors to work themselves out in the course of a class period).

\(^{41}\) The following list is taken from Momeyer, R. (1995). Teaching ethics to student relativists. *Teaching Philosophy, 18*(4), pp. 309-310 but the parenthetical explanations and applications are mine.

\(^{42}\) “The best way to defend the view that it is possible to rationally justify moral judgments is by example – to give a rational justification of certain moral judgments.” Carson, T. L. (1999). An approach to relativism. *Teaching Philosophy, 22*(2), p. 162.
Chapter Conclusion

The main claim of this chapter is that relativism is not a problem to be explained away but an opportunity to meaningfully improve philosophical teaching. To this end, I have drawn out both the philosophical and pedagogical consequences of relativism. I demonstrated that in an analysis of the concept arguments for and against cognitive and ethical relativism have practical consequences for teaching philosophy and for education more generally. These consequences in turn facilitated a much-needed discussion of the pedagogical import for teaching philosophy in the light of relativism. A new orientation regarding student relativism was advanced and the implications for teaching philosophy established. The clash between relativism and teaching philosophy threw light on inherent problems not only in the philosophical position of relativism itself, but in the prevailing pedagogy of philosophy teachers. A modified version of relativism was advanced to accommodate these problems, and practical teaching strategies were offered to solve them. Therefore, whereas the specter of relativism looms large in the philosophy classroom, it is possible to deflate the problem and utilize its redeemable import to improve both pedagogy and teaching.
IV. CHAPTER THREE

Pragmatism and Teaching Philosophy

Chapter Introduction

The present section builds on and is connected to the previous chapters insofar as pragmatism is called on to assist in clarifying the meaning of some central problems in teaching philosophy. When relativism was investigated pragmatically the pedagogical upshot was that its central problems were deflated. Additionally, I showed that relativism can be pedagogically productive. And like truth theory, a pragmatic attitude towards relativism helped motivate novel approaches to dealing with it in the classroom. In this same spirit I turn to more general areas in teaching philosophy that I hope will be worked out with similar beneficial outcomes. This shall be accomplished in part by examining what effects our analyses have on pedagogical practice, and how these effects can transform into habits that will form an evolving foundation for future philosophical teaching.

As with all subjects in education, teaching philosophy is fraught with myriad problems. This is demonstrably clear both in theory and practice. On the one hand, varying degrees of tension exist amongst theories of pedagogy, human nature and psychology, making teaching philosophy prima facie problematic. On the other hand what one actually does in the classroom when one teaches philosophy is likewise controversial since it seems unclear what philosophers do, what and how students learn, and the impact that teacher qualification has on the educational experience of students. The above list of theoretical and practical problems is, of course, not
exhaustive and in no way paints a complete picture of what actually is at stake in teaching philosophy. One might say no clear picture exists, let alone one that is complete.

To this end, I will explore some of the main problems in teaching philosophy and apply the pragmatic method to them. In this way I aim to disentangle problems so as to clarify their practical meaning to both teachers and students of philosophy. However, I do not profess to solve these problems definitively as this would be both arrogant and absurd; no practical problem can be solved in the abstract since we know things via shared inquiry which entails that our knowledge, attitudes and habits change, improve and give rise to new techniques to understand and clarify the problems themselves. My investigation concerns itself with possibilities in the sense that James (1907) suggests when he asks “When you say that a thing is possible, what difference does it make?” (James, 1907, p. 124). The pragmatic meaning of “possible” is by and large the conceivable uses an object or idea possesses, and on this point possibility is tantamount to meaningful and practical utility, namely: what one can reasonably expect to do with an idea, belief or action. I will focus on the problems of content, delivery and engagement in teaching philosophy, and apply the pragmatic method to them in order to clarify their meaning and show their implications for philosophical instruction and student educational experience. The main claim of this chapter is that with regards to

43 A strong version of this conception is that possibility is not merely the preclusion of non-contradiction or interference within a concept, but also the state of affairs that obtains if the markers of actuality are still in play in the process of life. Possibilities are concretely-grounded and not just lofty abstractions. This means “not only that there are no preventative conditions present, but that some of the conditions of production of the possible thing are actually here” (James, 1907, p. 126-7).
teaching philosophy, a pragmatic approach and attitude deflates its central problems and gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences. In this way my investigation will work out the pedagogical import of teaching philosophy via a pragmatic approach to its central problems.

**The Content Problem**

The first question we may ask is, ‘What do we mean by philosophical content?’ One line of attack a pragmatist can employ is to ask what are the possible/conceivable uses of philosophical content? As Peirce (1878/1923) says, “our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects” (Peirce, 1878, p. 45). First, we can expect that the content of philosophy is abstract, so in this case the meaning of content is that it is capable of being thought. In this sense, content is tantamount to concept/conceptualization. Hence, content admits of being known, understood, misunderstood, conceived, related, analyzed, inquired into, expanded, reduced, etc. Second, one can also expect to use philosophical content to assist us to find suitable ways to act in the world. This means that the content is an instrument to observe the effects that our ideas have on our actions, and reciprocally, what effect they have on others around us. A corollary to this is found in Dewey’s (1916/1944) comments about education as a necessity of social life when he argues analogically that students – *qua* organisms –are beings that not only adapt to their environments but change them through their activities. This notion of content is directly linked to what philosophy teachers understand the sphere of ethics and morality to encompass, and on this view content has a social dimension that goes beyond the
abstract meaning hitherto stated. Third, we can also expect to use philosophical content to clarify our ideas and beliefs. This meaning builds on the first possible use of abstraction in that it entails that content assists us to make and overturn distinctions, reduce concepts to their essential import, clarify ambiguity, and prepare the ground for a possible use of our ideas and beliefs. Hence it follows on this view that content is a means to an end, with the important caveat that ideas and beliefs are continually subject to revision and modification through a social process. Content is, following Peirce, a way to fix our beliefs; philosophical content itself is a means to resolve doubt and settle an issue provisionally – “the sole object of inquiry is settlement of opinion” (Peirce, 1877, p. 4).

**Diairesis vs. Elenchus: A Case Study in the ‘Content’ of Philosophy**

One case study that demonstrates the pedagogical import of the meaning of philosophical content as clarifying ideas and beliefs centres on Socrates and his teacher Prodicus. Corey (2008) contends that there is an historically salient link between Prodicus and Socrates because the former influenced the latter’s philosophical method. Corey states that Socrates was a student of Prodicus and that Socrates’ method of philosophizing was significantly influenced by Prodicus’ art of drawing-distinctions, *diairesis* (Corey, 2008, p. 2-4). Socrates lauded Prodicus’ ability to distinguish between synonyms and the correct usage of words. There is a clear link between this kind of philosophical practice and Peirce’s (1868) assertion that the one universal science (i.e., logic) is fundamentally characterized and underwritten by the three conceptions of a reference to a ground, the reference to
an object, and the reference to an interpretant (Peirce, 1868, p. 5). The latter assertion is tantamount to the basic components of a theory of meaning that enables one to clarify what one says via the rational interpretation of symbols and signs. Now, Socrates was able to clarify misunderstandings and misinterpretations to arrive at a working understanding of a concept or idea, even if such a result is provisional. But as Corey points out, the inherent weaknesses of distinction-making is that when overused it can lead to dubious distinctions, and because of its seductive power, it can be wielded as a logical weapon to undercut another person in the heat of an argument (Corey, 2008, p. 23).

An interesting aspect here is the suggestion that Prodicus’ diairesis is a check to Socratic elenchus (Corey, 2008, p. 21-22). The example he draws on from Book V of The Republic demonstrates Socrates’ realization that if uncritically used, diairesis can lead to logical uncertainty, falsehood, or worse: irrelevance. The notion of self-correction is vital when one comports oneself philosophically. By this I mean since diairesis usually leads to eristics, a certain level of self-awareness but also humility is required when one is teaching philosophy. A teacher must be aware that she stands on a slippery slope insofar as distinction-making is concerned since its uncritical use tends to lead to shoddy thinking and cheap parlour tricks masquerading as genuine philosophical work, or sophistry. No one wants to listen to a know-it-all, and still less someone who is obtuse and argumentative. In this way, teaching philosophy would do well to take on the ‘scientific attitude’ that Peirce (1896/1955) advances: “If a man burns to learn and sets himself to comparing his ideas with experimental results in order that he may correct those ideas, every scientific man will recognize
him as a brother, no matter how small his knowledge may be” (Peirce, 1896, p. 43).

And what is true of doing philosophy is likewise true of teaching it. The presupposition here is that philosophy is an activity rather than a body of knowledge, something I will draw out later in greater detail. So, the view that too much of a good thing (i.e., clarity through distinctions), is bad for us (i.e., distinction-making obfuscates the practical meaning/object of inquiry) is demonstrably clear in terms of teaching philosophy.

**Pedagogical Implications for Teaching Philosophy**

With regards to teaching philosophy, I think this is an invaluable insight for two reasons. First, since the content of philosophy is invariably loaded with concepts, it would be tempting to employ distinctions to clarify and explain difficult or loaded ideas to students. For example, the concept of the “afterlife” engenders a possible infinite regress of distinctions like soul/body, body/spirit, material/immaterial, actual/possible, etc. Hence if used without reference to concrete issues and likewise used uncritically, students immersed in distinction-making become mired in binaries, dichotomies and all other types of unproductive semantic pairs. This causes unnecessary confusion and a may engender a general feeling amongst students that philosophy yields arbitrariness, the very thing thinking with an eye to practice is employed to root out. The use of *diairesis* – hair-splitting techniques – entangles rather than exposes meaning and is just bad philosophical practice. Good philosophy is characterized by clear writing, speaking and thinking and thus

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44 For an opposing, yet unconvincing rebuttal to this position see Marshall, M., & Clark, A. M. (2010). *Is clarity essential to good teaching? Teaching Philosophy, 33*(3), 271.
*diairesis* as a tool must be used deftly.45 This is accomplished in part when a teacher is mindful of the number and frequency of distinctions made (i.e., in the context of a class discussion or a standard analysis of a primary source document it is helpful to limit the distinctions to only the most relevant), and the clarity (i.e., using Ockham’s razor, hence avoiding the unnecessary multiplication of entities when analyzing difficult concepts and theories). In these ways *diairesis* is used deftly as opposed to clumsily and obtusely by philosophy teachers.

The second reason that the overuse of *diairesis* impacts the teaching of philosophy negatively is based on what William James says about truth. Pragmatism states that if two ideas possess identical practical effects they mean the same thing, or if neither truth nor falsehood applies in a given context, the result is equally meaningless (James, 1907, p. 97). A sound teaching strategy, therefore, is to root out meaningless distinctions, ones that produce equivalent semantic import but nevertheless empty signification. In this way the pragmatic attitude deflates the problem germane to content by asking whether the content itself assists us to better understand our ideas. If, however, this is undesirable, the pragmatic strategy itself can be presented as an alternative to either Prodicus’ or Socrates’ methods.

Teaching philosophy is, at bottom, yet another means to open doors to new possibilities, and so it follows from this that what has been said is true on pragmatic grounds.

45 “Every teaching event is unique and the way to determine good practice is to be clear about what one is trying to achieve and to know one’s particular audience,” in Barrow, R. (2006). Empirical research into teaching. *Interchange, 37*(4), 287-307.
The essential pedagogical import here is that philosophical teaching is a continuum of best and shared practices. What Socrates learned – and also us by extension – is that teaching is learning in a certain fundamental way. The implication, therefore, is that learning how to teach can not only be taught, but it can be improved incrementally through collaboration and in a community of inquirers. And what is true of teachers is likewise the case with students. The important question, then, is whether the collaboration is dialogical or eristic. It is in this way that a pragmatic attitude opens one up to possible inquiries into new habits which in themselves lead to new ways of understanding one’s own teaching practice. Such an attitude deflates the problem of content (i.e., what to teach) and situates it within the realm of actual practice.

**History of Ideas vs. Skills and Dispositions**

But does this mean that the curriculum of philosophy is arbitrary? Pragmatically speaking, we must ask what effects occur when philosophy teachers select curricula for students. One approach to this question centres on the content-related problem in teaching philosophy that asks whether curricula should take the form of a 'history of ideas' or a 'skills and dispositions' model. I will address the latter model in the next section when I investigate the problem of delivery. The issues raised there fit

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46 Likewise, the following claims are entailed: 1. If no one “learns” then no “teaching” has gone on successfully, and; 2. If no one “follows” there was not any effective “leadership”.

hand in glove, and a more general outline of the meaning of the problem emerges far more organically than at present.

It must also be said that the history option is reflective of the *transmission model* of education (i.e., the aim of education is to transmit knowledge to students) whereas the skills option is analogous to the *transformation model* (i.e., the aim of education is to transform individuals and society). Such a dichotomy – arguably a *false* one – is absolutist in character, and thus anathema to the pragmatic attitude that strives to soften such disputes by focusing on their meaning in practice.

Following James (1907/1963) philosophy teachers should test ideas by tracing concrete consequences (James, 1907, p. 25) and treat theories as instruments, not answers to enigmas (James, 1907, p. 26). In this manner teachers conceive of content-related problems in light of their conceivable positive and enriching educational uses, and the degree to which they are useful tools in the experimental process of shared inquiry. Consequently, in this manner a pragmatic attitude gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences by deflating the so-called ‘problem’ created by those who caricature the history vs. skills debate in terms of the transmission/transformation dichotomy.

Now, in order to address the 'history vs. skills' problem we must first consider at what level a philosophy course is taught. This is crucial because teaching philosophy at university and high school are very different. At the university level, there is a great deal of freedom when it comes to course design. This is usually the result of specialization within the field in general, and in particular the degree to which a professor’s academic reputation allows her the
creative license to design a course based on her academic/research interests. There is also the issue of differentiation and accommodation as it regards the needs of undergraduates versus graduate students in philosophy. To the extent that an ‘emergent curriculum’ (a way of selecting course content on a class-to-class basis) is used at the undergraduate level, it seems unclear that it would be useful since many undergraduate courses are introductory in nature and thus the major themes of each course are likely to be covered only superficially, if at all. However, at the graduate level an emergent model proves very useful since it reflects both teacher and student interest (both parties usually teach and take, respectively, a course for personal academic reasons), and has the added advantage of an evolving curriculum that develops out of shared inquiry. Following Dewey, this approach grows out of shared mutual interest. The content does not mark the end of our power to vary, but, on the contrary, emphasizes “our ability to vary responses till we find appropriate and efficient ways of acting” (Dewey, 1914, p. 49). The emergent curriculum, pragmatically speaking, has the potential to enrich educational experience more than a static, linear approach to the curriculum because of its evolving and experimental character.

At the public high school level – such as the grade 11 and 12 courses offered in Ontario schools – the meaning of the curriculum question hinges on what unit

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48 For an interesting discussion of the impact that style has on the philosophy of education classroom teaching practice in faculties of education where most students do not have a formal background in philosophy, see Suissa, J. (2008). Teaching and doing philosophy of education: The question of style. Studies in Philosophy and Education, 27(2), 185-195.

49 Some educational theorists appear to have caught on to this notion as a way to combat individualistic tendencies in education. For a more robust defense of this position see Margonis, F. (2011). In pursuit of respectful teaching and intellectually-dynamic social fields. Studies in Philosophy and Education, 30(5), 433-439.
strands the teacher selects. This is because at the high school level both courses are introductory; the grade 11 course is designed to introduce students to the "major questions" of philosophy whereas the grade 12 course is geared towards an initiation to the "major theories and branches". Correspondingly, the selection process itself raises the issue of teacher freedom in choosing their own curricular contents. This is because although there is the option to choose strands/units of study, there is an obligation to choose from a given and government-mandated content determined in advance. Coupled with the problem of teacher qualification (very few high school philosophy teachers have a background in philosophy), it is very likely that the history of ideas model is used more frequently because of teacher comfort regarding subject mastery. Thus, at the high school level the content is more likely to be taught along the lines of separate and discreet units, and consequently this approach leads to a tendency for a linear and chronological organization of content that aims to show the historical links between ideas, concepts and themes in the history of philosophy. As with any introductory course this model seems to be the default alternative.

**Pedagogical Implications for Teaching Philosophy**

From the perspective of practice, however, one significant pedagogical import is that students experience philosophy for the first time as a 'history of ideas', and consequently, may experience philosophy as a fixed narrative with definite teleological features. The pedagogical ramifications include, but are not limited to: 1. Philosophy is a narrative, 2. Philosophy has a definite starting and terminal point
with a beginning, middle and end, 3. Some versions of the story are prioritized over others, 4. Individual philosophers, schools of philosophy and philosophic themes are selected arbitrarily and hence some are omitted. Taken together this approach advances a canonical model.\textsuperscript{50} One way pragmatism supports this model – subversive as it is here – is to settle metaphysical disputes (James, 1907, p. 23). As it is contra dogma and anti-foundational, the settling of disputes is contingent on what ramifications to practice result from its analysis and therefore no dispute is ever settled in the abstract. Hence settling metaphysical disputes is subversive in regards to the history model because pragmatism refuses to solve a dispute without reference to its effects. The settling of dispute \emph{mutatis mutandis} in the history model is a Peircean ‘third’ in that philosophy teachers are more concerned with getting students to think about the \emph{process} their thinking undergoes when thought is directed intentionally to causes/effects (Peirce, 1992, p. 250). This result is metacognitive and deflationary; it is metacognitive because students think about their habits within the context of the educational experience, and it is deflationary because it reduces the problem of delivery to the common sense notion of judging an idea (in this case a ‘disputed one’ in metaphysics, for example) by its effects on other ideas in the \emph{history} of philosophy.

But an important aspect to this content problem is whether and to what extent the content of the story \emph{is} fixed. There are strong pedagogical reasons to teach philosophy historically, including but not limited to: 1. Philosophers

themselves respond to the work done in the past by their predecessors, making a history of ideas a natural fit. 2. Evolutionarily speaking, the meaning of an idea is what and how it has been put to use by different philosophers at different times and contexts, and the degree to which it has changed other ideas, and whether it has changed intrinsically at all. 3. Due to the nature of philosophical discourse, philosophers have historically experimented with past ideas and a ‘history’ of that experimentation would capture the significance of the dynamic movement of these experiments in thought, and 4. Stories are not necessarily teleological as they can be non-linear in as much as time and theme are concerned, interactional in as much as the degree to which the storyteller and audience interact to co-construct the meaning of the story, and pluralistic in that no two stories are alike, not to mention that a history of ideas can entail other and/or competing narratives as corollaries and addendums to the one presented. Thus, the meaning of the content problem is predicated on the uses to which content itself can be put in the context of teaching philosophy. Taken together with reasons 1-4, the non-linear, interactional and pluralistic effects noted above open new educational possibilities for teaching philosophy that will benefit students.

The Delivery Problem

As stated, the main claim of this chapter is that with regards to teaching philosophy, a pragmatic approach and attitude deflates its central problems and gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences. The problem concerning content was analyzed pragmatically, and the net result has been the emergence of both an
attitudinal shift in teaching philosophy and some intriguing practical possibilities as it relates to teaching practice. I contend, following Dewey, that “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (Dewey, 1897/1959, p. 27). That is, the content of philosophy must arise out of and reflect the possibilities in experience, and furthermore, both the means and ends of philosophical content are identical. But in terms of method, I assert with Dewey that “the question of method is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of development of a child’s power and interests” (Dewey, 1897/1959, p. 27-8). In other words, there must be a close correlation between the interests and capabilities of a student and the methodology a philosophy teacher employs in the classroom to ensure the possibility of good pedagogical practice. I will now discuss the problem of delivery as it relates to teaching philosophy.

Delivery is a problem precisely because – like curricular content – it implies pedagogy and by extension, the normative dimension of educational practice. Pedagogy can be dangerous either by design or omission and thus it follows that it is a problem to be worked out for teaching philosophy since so much of what philosophy offers to students hangs on what can be done with its content.\(^51\) Now, it was said earlier that philosophy is more like an activity than a body of knowledge even though as the latter it still retains some genuine and practical use for both

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teachers and students alike. I will develop this claim by first investigating what
Dewey means by direction since direction itself seems implicit in the concept and
practice of curriculum delivery. Although one could make the argument that they
are pedagogically equivalent since their difference is only a matter of degree, I will
treat them as distinct in a nominal sense.

**Delivery as Direction: Dewey’s Notion of Education as Direction**

Following Dewey, I think that our dispositions are formed by participating in joint
activity with the important added caveat that the use of things is just as important
as the activity itself (Dewey, 1916, p. 28-29). Dewey reiterates his notion of
meaning when he says that the significance of a thing/action is the characteristic use
to which the thing is put (Dewey, 1916, p. 29). Our actions are always in response to
the meaning of the thing, and the meaning of the thing is its usefulness in practice.
But direction that is educative is not simply responding to use but rather forming
the mind to have an idea about that thing that compels one to respond to it in view
of a possible future action and its potential coherence within a schema of future
actions of like character (Dewey, 1916, p. 30). This forming is educative teaching,
the shape that teaching philosophy should take if it is to make a difference in the
lives of students.

From this Dewey advances the notion of common understandings. Here he
means that when one views the consequences of one’s actions in the context of how
the act will impact another person, and to what extent that same consequence has
on oneself, the net result is direction of a social kind, one which shapes the
individual's present and future acts in light of a shared understanding and set of behaviours (Dewey, 1916, p. 30-31). On the one hand we are directed from without (physical stimuli) and use (and are used by) these influences to direct our behaviour, and; on the other hand we modify one another's habits and dispositions through the use of these stimuli (Dewey, 1916, p. 31). The contextual and interactive elements of pragmatism are clearly evident here, and philosophy teachers would be wise to understand its pedagogical import: delivery *qua* Deweyean direction is future-oriented and more concerned with how students will use their reasoning skills to not only understand the meaning of their own behaviour but also to see that their actions do not exist in a vacuum. The fact that students experience that their ideas and actions exist in a world outside their subjective consciousness, and that they have an impact globally is a victory for teachers who educate in an age saturated by solipsism and vapid narcissism.

Thus control is not personal but intellectual (Dewey, 1916, p. 33). We are *directed* by the habits of understanding that take into consideration the uses of things, how those uses cohere with the outside world, and to what extent the former and latter bear on our own lived experience *vis-à-vis* joint/shared activities and experiences (Dewey, 1916, p. 33). This is what Dewey means by social control (i.e., educative direction), and this is the meaning of what philosophy as an activity is predicated on.
The Presuppositions of Philosophy as Activity

However, the claim that philosophy is an interactive phenomenon is underwritten by some arguably contentious presuppositions. First, it must be admitted that if in 
se philosophy is an activity, it follows that it is a shared and conjoint inquiry. Another presupposition is that just as important as the activity is to the meaning of teaching philosophy, the uses to which the ideas and actions in the activity are put are similarly relevant. A third assumption builds on the two previously mentioned: that there is an element of control that is inexorably linked to the activity itself. These assumptions are diametrically opposed (and for good reason) to traditional notions of what philosophy is and how it is normally done; the common picture is of a solitary thinker who in isolation concocts theories, writes about them in esoteric and technical language which in turn are delivered via lecture either by philosophers themselves, or by some highly accredited and specialized professor, and if not, is at the very least read in academic journals by like-minded philosophers. On this view, delivery is a moot point since nowhere in the above picture is the student a concern for the philosophy teacher.

I wish to challenge this view. Correspondingly, I will discuss the works of two practitioners of philosophy (Miller, 1995; Goosens, 1975) who at bottom stress the instrumental value of philosophy, a value predicated on a certain kind of pedagogical delivery germane to our purpose. Although there is some divergence between what constitutes the aim, goal, content, methodology, obstacles, and general characteristics of teaching philosophy, there remains a common thread in the works themselves. This is the shared assertion that teaching philosophy is not
so much about transmitting content, as about teaching a way of being involving both skill and dispositions. The latter is an inherently rational and self-critical existence that permits of reasoned discourse in a social setting. Teaching philosophy, on this view, concerns itself with fostering thinking and analytical skills in students in a socially dynamic environment. In short, the objective of teaching philosophy is to facilitate students to philosophize; a central aim is to assist students to become reflective, especially with regards to their own thinking and acting. I could not agree more. Moreover, there is evidence here that philosophy is intrinsically valuable; however, there is much greater emphasis on its instrumental value, and consequently the teaching methods naturally spring from this belief.

**Miller: The Public Model**

According to Miller (1995) philosophy must be taught according to a ‘public model’ where students are taught by a ‘Socratic’ teacher, and by this process, become ‘apprentices’ (Miller, 1995, p. 40). Here philosophy is presented not merely as some discrete unit of learning to be ‘known’ (e.g., taught to know how to use a syllogism in ethical discourse), but rather as a methodology by which one becomes ‘philosophical’ (e.g., taught how to think about, discuss rationally and defend beliefs related to, say, the ethical issues pertaining to particular cases of assisted suicide

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52 Alternately, some connect explicitly this notion to the problem of teaching ethics and virtue. A sampling of recent and representative figures in this literature includes: Billington (2006), Ficarotta (2009), Giebel & Bock (2012), Huschle (2012), Stokes (2012) and Williams (1989).

53 I wish to dissociate myself here with those who insist on qualifying ‘thinking’ with the word ‘critical’. With regards to thinking philosophically – or for that matter, in any way that is clear and productive – the adjective ‘critical’ is a moot point and begs the question as to what kind of thinking can exist that is not itself critical in some fundamental way? ‘Critical’ is not a real predicate. For the opposing view, refer to the works of Robert H. Ennis and Harvey Siegel for the representative literature on this subject.
which may only accidentally entail syllogistic reasoning). This approach is reminiscent of James (1907/1963) who says that as an attitude (insert Miller’s term ‘methodology’ here) pragmatism looks away from \textit{a priori} principles and categories and instead focuses on effects, consequences and facts (James, 1907, p. 27). And, following James, the delivery model is effective if it helps to loosen the rigidity of student ideas because the teacher possesses no fixed dogmas, prejudices or cannons (James, 1907, p. 38). Again, this is accomplished when the delivery assists students to avoid settling opinions in the abstract and instead directs them to think about how they can settle an issue by hashing out the ways it can or should be dealt with in the present and/or in concrete cases. This result is deflationary as it contextualizes the problem of delivery within the sphere of human action; the stakes of settling opinion are concrete and not abstract.

The public model is inherently social and conversational: the teacher facilitates discussion that becomes philosophical when students imaginatively create, analyze and defend their ideas in a public setting. Similarly, there is ample evidence in Miller that teaching philosophy is a training process in which habituation and practice is required to \textit{be} philosophical (Miller, 1995, p. 41-43, 51-54). This line of thinking is congruent with Dewey who says that our intellectual dispositions, our inclinations as rational beings enmeshed in actual contingencies, in short, our \textit{habits} “do not wait” as they “actively seek for occasions to pass into full operation...Above all, the intellectual element in a habit fixes the relation of the habit to varied and elastic use, and hence to continued growth” (Dewey, 1916, p. 48). On this view, the delivery of philosophy teachers should aim to habituate
students to energetically seek opportunities for intellectual growth, which in effect has the positive pedagogical import of shaping disposition for future action.

In short, the educational experience takes the form of an expert/apprentice model but with the important caveat that the experience itself is a shared and conjoint inquiry. It is highly interactional and dialogical. Consequently, a significant practical import which hangs on this outcome is that philosophical teaching and student educational experience is embedded interactionally in the context of the learning environment.

**Goosens: The Analytical Approach**

Much of what is said in Goosens (1975) rests on the assertion that philosophy is more like an art than a science. (Goosens, 1975, p. 5) From this flows the argument that the goal for philosophy teachers is to teach philosophizing, or at the very least expose students to standards of argumentation (Goosens, 1975, p. 7). According to Goosens, this is accomplished by allowing students to be engaged actively in the process of intellectual creativity with the aim that the latter will engender an ability to give and evaluate arguments (Goosens, 1975, p. 6). But it should be noted that what philosophy tries to teach is not knowledge of a method *in the abstract* but the skills necessary to become a methodological thinker.  

One objection is that since Goosens claims the content of philosophy is philosophizing *qua* argumentation, then *prima facie* philosophy is logic. If this is true, then philosophy’s content is a methodology, which contradicts his thesis that it

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is some kind of creative and rational activity. Although on the surface this may seem like a quick *reductio ad absurdum*, it is nonetheless true.55 But it is not true unequivocally. For the purposes of teaching philosophy, an even quicker reconstruction from pragmatism can be done that salvages the positive pedagogical import in Goosens’ delivery approach. Peirce (1896/1955) advanced a form of ‘fallibilism’ which states that we cannot, via rational discourse or scientific experiment, attain absolute certainty concerning matters of fact (Peirce, 1896, p. 59). This applies also to logic since thinking has an evolutionary character; since antecedents and consequents change in the process of inquiry, we can anticipate that our logical rules will evolve as well. As a result, our logical rules will change so even if philosophy is logic (or, following Goosens, philosophical teaching delivery focuses exclusively on standards of argumentation), philosophizing as such will take on a more flexible and plastic form. This is because the rules themselves are evolving and therefore students will come to realize *in practice*56 that Peirce was essentially right when he asserted that we can never claim by way of reasoning to absolute certainty, exactitude and universality (Peirce, 1896, p. 56).

### Making Room for Teleology: The Imitation of Means

For all of its merit the above models all assert the primacy of the Socratic method of teaching philosophy. So far the pragmatic attitude is copasetic with this result.

55 “Philosophy is the only discipline that has thinking as both its *subject* and its *method* of inquiry” in Beyer, B. K. (1990). What philosophy offers to the teaching of thinking. *Educational Leadership, 47*(5), pp. 55

56 A version of this attitude is present in Butchart, S., & Handfield, T. (2009). Using peer instruction to teach philosophy, logic, and critical thinking. *Teaching Philosophy, 32*(1). Here, the authors contend that peer instruction complements and improves the lecture experience of undergraduate students.
Nevertheless, Socratic delivery models are intrinsically teleological; philosophical discussions presuppose fixed questions/answers/themes set out in advance by the expert teacher that the apprentice must locate with finality, and if not, the discussion must continue indefinitely until it does. The pedagogical implication here is that teaching philosophy must always have a target which itself is based on a priori certainties that are out there in the world for inquirers to ‘find’. In effect, it may be argued that the delivery models proposed thus far are versions of metaphysical realism for philosophy teachers and students. Again, the pragmatic attitude would for all intents and purposes endorse such a result.

But before I discuss an alternate view, I will put the cart before the horse and address the objection via Dewey (1916/1944) and what he calls the ‘imitation of means’. If we take the above objection to its logical conclusion we are led to believe that teleological instruction is inherently bad teaching practice. But are there any other conceivable uses of the word ‘end’? What if by ‘teleological’ one had the predetermined goal to form disposition and educate the whole individual by actively engaging them in their own educational experience? Would not this end be something worthy of repetition? Of imitation? Could these processes be considered good teaching practice? Dewey states that the value of imitation has been misunderstood via the fallacy of false cause, and suggests on this basis that if imitation has any value it is when one imitates the means of an action – how something is done and what connections they have to reality. In this way the individual plays a more active role in her learning (Dewey, 1916, p. 35-36). Thus, it is conceivable that the meaning of ‘teleological teaching delivery’ can signify
something positive for teaching philosophy, and it is for this pragmatic reason that versions of the Socratic delivery method have useful pedagogical imports for philosophy teachers and students.

**Peters and the Postmodern Rejoinder: Philosophy as Pedagogy**

For an alternate but thematically similar view, I will now turn to the work of Michael Peters (2001) who states Wittgenstein’s style of “doing” philosophy is pedagogical. Peters argues that Wittgenstein advanced a pedagogy of teaching that is essentially bound up with his own unique styles of non-teleological and discursive thinking and writing. He argues that Wittgenstein can be classified as a postmodernist thinker whose styles of thinking, writing and teaching embraced non-Socratic dialogical methods (Peters, 2001, p. 9-10). Peters’ main claim is that philosophical pedagogy must move beyond traditional dialogical models and embrace the Wittgensteinian approach in order to create the conditions whereby teachers realize there are many approaches to doing philosophy, and similarly, that students may “think for themselves” (Peters, 2001, p. 11-12).

One interesting feature of Peters’ argument is his remarks about Wittgenstein’s conception of his own philosophical practice. Peters claims that Wittgenstein likened teaching philosophy to a journey, and that the (mental) journey should be led by the teacher so that “the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks” (Peters, 2001, p. 3). And

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contra Socrates (and Miller, et al. above), the journey is not predetermined and thus there is a radical element of free thought explicit in this brand of pedagogical delivery. The natural order of thoughts is not to be parroted like some exercise in teacher-student *mimesis*; rather, the freedom allows students to think for themselves under the guidance of a teacher who is herself free to let her thoughts roam. The pragmatic rejoinder could certainly be whether such a model – in effect and practice – degenerates into an ‘anything goes’ scenario in which an explicitly ‘child-centered’ model allows free reign to students to drive blindly the direction of the course.\(^\text{58}\)

An immediate question emerges, then, as to whether and to what extent this model is conducive to public and post-secondary education where universal standards and curriculum expectations reign supreme. It may be argued that Wittgenstein’s model is incongruent with current trends in education because the pedagogy and teaching method may not be repeatable. Thus the practical meaning of the delivery is that its utility is limited, and if this is true, it follows that as a delivery model it may in fact be unique but nonetheless limited in application.

But there are other meanings tied to the possible and conceivable uses of this model that help disentangle problems related to the delivery of teaching philosophy. These meanings in turn deflate the problem of standardization noted above as the problem turns on what effects spring from intensity and experimentation in philosophical teaching. First, the intensity with which Wittgenstein used examples

demonstrated his desire to show students the value and existence of their own perplexity (Peters, 2001, p. 4). There is ample room for intellectual growth in philosophy classrooms, and it is clear that Wittgenstein’s pedagogy made room for it via concrete examples with his students.\textsuperscript{59} We must remember that he quite literally paused for minutes at a time to ponder a confounding question while philosophy students waited patiently in what can only be described as an ‘awkward’ yet nonetheless intense classroom moment. Second, the experimental element in his pedagogy is interesting because it pushes philosophical delivery to its own limits. Wittgenstein himself believed that what he was doing was not philosophy, but a “new subject.” In this way the postmodern ideal of mutual edification of both teacher and student is evident via the practice of non-teleological dialogue. As the experiments occurred within class time, the content and delivery (and hence the mutual learning that occurred as a side-effect) evolved. Thus experimentation in delivery yields a dynamic educational experience for both teacher and student. Here we see the experimental nature writ large: it respects difference, challenges hierarchical teacher authority, and it is uninterested in universals and ‘T’ truths (Peters, 2001, p. 9-10).

In terms of experimentation, I find this proposition both intriguing and unrealistic. On the one hand, it is intriguing because there is arguably no more suitable learning environment than the philosophy classroom where teacher and student can challenge the status quo (whether this challenge comes in the form of

\textsuperscript{59} Not surprising considering Wittgenstein was a mechanical engineer before turning to philosophy!
content or delivery style).\textsuperscript{60} I maintain that normatively, every classroom should be a space for educational experiences of all kinds, but it is with specific reference to the autonomous use of reason that we find its clearest expression in philosophy whose \textit{modus operandi} is usually to challenge beliefs, ideas and ways of acting.\textsuperscript{61} But on the other hand, experimentation in the sense that Peters argues for is unrealistic because at a certain point the specter of consistent curriculum delivery arises. To this end, let us consider once more the example of high school philosophy. How would Wittgenstein's model be repeated across school boards? Could it be team-taught? How would the teacher mentoring process work? What about criterial evaluations of teachers? Could they be used to assess the quality of such a delivery?

My feeling, following Noddings (1997), is that the notion of standards in education is problematic, and if standards are to be used they must be understood as having emerged out of a context that comes into direct contact with students and the local environment. Thus it does not make a practical difference whether students learn the content and skills stated in a philosophy curriculum using one delivery model over. This is because the educational \textit{aims} that shape the standards that, in turn, engender the delivery are co-constructed in a socially interactive and democratic manner. This means-ends argument is essentially an appeal to a pragmatic attitude: if students learn to use the skills to think about philosophical

\textsuperscript{60} Important gains in research about how to shift the emphasis from an adversarial/antagonistic to an “agonistic”/mutually reciprocating and edifying model in dealing with conflicts over the status quo, see Ruitenberg, C. (2009). Educating political adversaries: Chantal mouffe and radical democratic citizenship education. \textit{Studies in Philosophy and Education}, 28(3), 269-281.

\textsuperscript{61} That there is a very strong moral dimension to challenging the status quo, a dimension that is shared not just by philosophy teachers but all teachers in general is argued empirically by Luttenberg, L., Bergen, T., & Hermans, C. (2004). Pragmatic, ethical and moral: Towards a refinement of the discourse approach. \textit{Journal of Moral Education}, 33(1), 35-55.
questions skillfully, then the “aim of the great educator is to teach us to think for ourselves” is accomplished (Peters, 2001, p. 12). And is not this a noble aim of all education? A counter to this line of reasoning is to ask why the local environment is prioritized over the global context. The presupposition here is that since a central function of education is to prepare students for life more broadly, should its standards respond to the broader contexts also? Although I am sympathetic to this view, the counter-argument entails a false dichotomy in that standards must be either universal or local whereas I am suggesting that the very notion of standards is problematic, and; that perhaps a *via media* is to see standards emerging both from a specific and general context for the singular aim to help students succeed in their learning.

It is in this vein that the aim of education – as a problem for teaching philosophy – is deflated by the pragmatic attitude and correspondingly opens new possibilities for educational experiences. Dewey (1916/1944) states that the criteria for good aims in education are that they: (a) Proceed from where an educator currently finds herself, including where the student currently is, (b) Adapt/change and are improved as she goes along in her educational process as new information and experience comes in, and (c) That when achieved, aims put teacher and student in a better position to build on their own self-growth and set new aims in the future (Dewey, 1916, p. 104-109). The aim is fluid and malleable, not static and fixed as is the case with current educational ‘course expectations’. It comes from within the educational experience, not imposed from without. Aims enable possible future experiences to emerge as they are tested within the
educational experience itself rather than some contrived ‘standard’ or ‘developmental stage’ that is artificially pre-determined external to the classroom.

**The Engagement Problem: Not ‘How’ but ‘Whom’**

Inasmuch as my purpose has been to show that with regards to teaching philosophy, a pragmatic approach and attitude deflates many central problems and gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences, it is incumbent on me to round out the picture and build on the gains made in the previous analysis of both content and delivery. To this end, a final problem to be discussed is student engagement.

Given the outcome of our investigation which has led us to conclude that inquiry is a collective enterprise and that thinking is always corrective and social in nature, it is behooves us to ask: Whom are to be engaged? To my mind, much more interesting than how to engage students is which students can be engaged philosophically? A case study of children and philosophy is relevant here since it presents a challenge to normative principles of pedagogy and to the very notion of what teaching and philosophy can do for individuals.

**Philosophy for Children?**

The “Philosophy for Children” movement (P4C) has gained tremendous steam in recent years leading philosophers of education and psychologists to consider whether and to what extent children are capable of being taught philosophy.

The main claim of P4C is that children are capable of serious and sustained philosophical thinking. The implicit presupposition is that thinking is known
through its observed effects and that children are seen engaging in sustained attention to philosophical topics and questions. We often talk about children as having the capacity to ask the fundamental questions without bias or filter, and to seek to answer 'big questions' sincerely.62 Two of the chief proponents of this view are Garreth B. Matthews (1980, 2008) and Matthew Lipman (2003) who oppose an entire legion of traditionally-minded philosophers and developmental psychologists. The main proponents of the opposing view are often taken to be Jean Piaget (1929, 1950, and 1955) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1958, 1981, and 1984) who asserted that thinking and moral reasoning take place in stages where in each stage must be passed in order to advance to the next.63 On this view, philosophical thinking occurs at a much later stage than that of childhood since children are not capable of abstract reasoning.

*The Pragmatic Response to Developmental Psychology*

Since pragmatism is opposed to exclusively mechanistic and/or teleological explanations of natural and philosophical phenomena, the chief objection to P4C that comes from developmental psychology fails. This is because Piaget and Kohlberg’s form of developmental psychology rests on the assertion that cognition and moral reasoning is pulled teleologically from in front such that human thought and action proceeds to fixed *terminus ad quem*. So construed, when a dyed in the

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62 It is not out of the realm of possibility to hear children ask adults deceptively simple questions such as: “Who made me?”,”Why should I do that?” and “Where is God?”

63 Perhaps not ironically, some philosophers of education have taken this position uncritically. For a modified version of this assertion from the perspective that there are logical and so-called ‘critical’ thinking skills all teachers must have before they instruct students, see Chiasson, P. H. (2005). Peirce’s design for thinking: An embedded philosophy of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 37*(2), 207-226.
wool theoretician who is anti P4C approaches the problem of engagement from a pragmatic angle she would be open to the possibility that a developmental end (i.e., a ‘stage’) suggests the end of growth. She would not, as Dewey would say, idealize childhood but rather see the philosophical potentiality in the child; “since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education” (Dewey, 1916, p. 51). And, following Dewey, since life means growth and since educational ends themselves emerge out of the activities we enact socially, to deny teaching philosophy to children is to deny the potential for growth to develop in the child. On no account is this beneficial to children, teachers or society in general.

Another response from pragmatism comes from Peirce (1896) who exhorts us not to impede investigation by being insincere in our investigatory habits. Peirce states that “Upon this first, and in one sense this sole, rule of reason, that in order to learn you must desire to learn, an in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think, there follows one corollary which itself deserves to be inscribe upon every wall of the city of philosophy: Do not block the way of inquiry” (Peirce, 1896, p. 54). To block inquiry – whether by prohibiting teachers from experimenting with philosophy with children or by being anathema to the very idea simply because it contradicts one’s philosophical orientation – is to investigate insincerely. On this account, by being open to new and possible inquiries, the problem of engagement with regards to philosophy for children is deflated by simply acting in such a way so as to be open to the possibility of engaging children philosophically in order to see what results occur in the process. From this will flow
new inquires into how and when to engage children, which in the end result will benefit the educational experience of students because teaching practice will be directed by actual outcomes in experience. Following Peirce, to the pragmatist the question is not whether children are capable of philosophy but rather how and in what capacity can philosophy improve the habits and dispositions of children, and in what sense can philosophy be adapted to children. The only way this is possible is if the very prospect of philosophy for children is treated as a genuine possibility in the first place; P4C must be sincerely investigated if it is to have any use for educators and students alike.

**Matthews’ Objection to Piaget**

Garreth B. Matthews (2008) asks us to reconsider our notion of what a child is cognitively capable of in order to philosophize with them. His aim is to raise awareness of the possibility of doing philosophy with children on the grounds that Piaget’s model of cognitive development is fundamentally flawed.

According to Matthews, if we follow Piaget we end up viewing children as “incomplete beings” (Matthews, 2008, p. 28) because they are deficient in the higher-order thinking skills normally associated with adults not just in terms of the content of ideas, but the level of abstraction that their ideas are capable of reaching (Matthews, 2008, p. 27). Consequently, children are incapable of having “deep conversations” (Matthews, 2008, p. 27). Matthews argues that Piaget’s theory of the ‘stages of development’ misses the essential (and if we are to accept his anecdotal evidence, the factual), point that children have a predilection (in his words, a ‘gift’)
to “be more interested in philosophical questions than the average adult” (Matthews, 2008, p. 40). Accordingly, Matthews argues that philosophizing with children is a natural fit, a logical extension of their cognitive capabilities. This is because their hitherto misunderstood cognitive capability invalidates the traditional view that they are deficient with regards to the level that their abstract thinking can reach.

Another major claim Matthews makes is that philosophizing with children is mutually beneficial to both child and adult (Matthews, 2008, p. 40). This mutual edification improves interpersonal relations between children and adults for two reasons: 1. Children grow out of ignorance and can thus positively effect change as they age, and 2. Adults are forced to rethink their own ideas, hence rewarding them with novel approaches to old problems (Matthews, 2008, p. 40/33). The practical consequence of this brand of mutual edification is the wholesale replacement of Piaget’s notion for a theory of identity which states that children and adults “mirror” each other in terms of their abilities. Matthews argues that if we are “less inclined to view children on the deficit model of childhood” it follows that philosophizing with children is possible opening up possibility for an “opportunity for mutual exchange and mutual respect” (Matthews, 2008, p. 28, 40).

One objection to the above is that the necessity of philosophizing with children on the basis that some children show an aptitude to philosophize commits the fallacy of converse accident. That is, just because the atypical situation of a few children who show flashes of philosophical behaviour exists does not imply that we should abandon the notion that children possess inferior cognitive abilities than
adults. And if we follow this logic we are led to conclude that cognitive dissonance between individuals is a matter of *degree*, not kind, and hence we must support the notion of cognitive *levels*. On the other hand, the whole rejection of P4C rests on the claim that children are incapable of meeting the standards of adults. But if one *inverts* the standards the question then becomes whether adults can ever approach the child’s capacity for openness. On this view, the educational notion of a ‘level’ is problematic because philosophical thinking becomes less about reaching abstract levels of thought and more about receptivity to different and diverging ideas.

**Pragmatic Application**

However, let us see what the pragmatic method yields when we aim to clarify the notion of ‘level’ as it applies to teaching philosophy. We shall ask: (1) What can we expect to do with a level? (2) What practical difference is there between a level and a stage? (3) Can a level be modified/changed? and, (4) What habits of action emerge when we conceive of levels as real?

In response to (1) we may ask whether thinking can be measured and quantified. If not, what can we expect to gauge a thought against, and what does that mean to teaching a philosophical idea/theory to an individual if the effect of thinking can not be observed? If the answer to this is no it follows that standard issue criterial assessment is impossible, and with that grading as a whole must be abandoned. Pragmatically, this may be useful to students since grading is very problematic and may pave the way for a renaissance in anecdotal assessment that is inherently more descriptive, personal and timely than the uninformative percentage
and canned report card comment currently in vogue today. With regards to (2) we may ask whether we can definitively say what is the ‘age of reason’, and consequently, can we do different things with ideas at different ages that can be useful to anyone at any time? That is, are levels and stages not two words that describe the same phenomena, namely, progress in time? If so, it is clear that, following James, the word ‘level’ has been misunderstood dogmatically as a result of a tender-minded attitude (James, 1907, p. 6-8). To (3) we ask whether philosophy teachers can alter their pedagogical practice to account for diversity in their class, and if so, does that mean no level is absolute in the cognitive sense of the term? Lastly, (4) implies a deadening of practice since it inhibits teacher and student experimentation. This is true because cognitive levels are intrinsically static, fixed and immobile and hence philosophy teachers are forced to (a) either abandon a student who acts atypically (i.e., shows philosophical aptitudes), or (b) force-fit their content and delivery models to conform to a pre-determined level spectrum. In either case, both result in unprofitable learning experiences and must be abandoned as uneducational.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The main claim of this chapter has been that a pragmatic approach and attitude deflates some central problems in teaching philosophy and gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences. The application of the pragmatic method to the pressing problems of content, delivery and engagement in teaching philosophy was utilized in order to clarify their pedagogical meaning and
implication to both philosophical instruction and student educational experience. The work of the classic pragmatists – Peirce, James and Dewey – were put to work on the problems stated above, and the net results were outcomes that are more evolutionary, experimental and interactional in nature and practice than current pedagogies of teaching philosophy that exist presently. In the end, however, pragmatism’s own theories are just hypotheses and it follows that philosophy teachers must remain open to pedagogical experimentation. To the teaching of philosophy, pragmatism stresses that what we have as foundations are habits, nothing more; but the challenge is to find practical foundations for those habits that emerge out of a genuine and sincere comportment to our teaching practice.
V. CONCLUSION

Our inquiry into the meaning of truth, relativism and practice as it relates to philosophical teaching has some crucial implications for future pedagogy. One could argue that these implications are imperatives that when taken together help orient our future educational habits. One implication is that sound pedagogy should be situated within the context of life. This allows teaching to evolve and grow alongside members in the learning community and does not impose method from outside experience, but rather within life itself. Another implication is that genuine and sincere teaching and philosophizing is attitudinal in nature. Teachers and students should strive to be open and flexible to possibility such that they can deliver and learn content effectively. An important caveat is that this is accomplished in such a way that aims to be mutually beneficial for all parties involved in the learning experience. A final implication is that sound philosophical teaching practice is equally concerned with the process and result of teaching. In this way philosophy is taught as neither a fixed continuum of ideas nor a set of intellectual habits; rather, it can be both, or neither, or partially one and not the other, etc. In a word, philosophical teaching should strive to be plastic and intentional.

In Chapter One I showed that it does not matter philosophically if there is an essence to truth as far as education is concerned. Moreover, I demonstrated that when the pragmatic attitude is applied to truth it yields beneficial outcomes for teachers and students. In Chapter Two I illustrated that relativism is not a problem
to be explained away but an opportunity to meaningfully improve philosophical teaching. I demonstrated that pragmatism loosens rigid and fixed notions of relativism held by philosophers and students, providing a novel alternative for future practices. Lastly, in Chapter Three I showed that a pragmatic approach and attitude deflates some central problems in teaching philosophy and gives rise to new possibilities for educational experiences. The investigation of the problems of content and delivery were our entry-points, and the outcomes were more evolutionary, experimental and interactional in nature and practice than presently advanced in current pedagogies of philosophic teaching. Taken together these chapters point decidedly to the deflationary character of pragmatism and the extent to which its application improves philosophical teaching.

Our inquiry has stressed the problematic relation of theory and practice. It may even be argued that this relation is necessary in that they are mutually inclusive objects within the same domain. But a defense of this position has not been made explicit in this thesis, and to the extent that it has I leave to the reader about which to inquire. At bottom, our inquiry has denied the traditional bifurcation of theory and practice and instead focused on what conceivable effects emerge when one investigates the possibilities of their interaction and relation. It has demonstrated that we cannot understand one apart from the other. Clearly, then, a major presupposition of our entire project has concerned this very relation of theory to practice. I maintain that because of this inexorably close connection a new, more pedagogically useful orientation has emerged with regards to teaching philosophy.
Our inquiry has therefore constituted both its object and subject since the experience of the investigation has carefully documented the ongoing transaction between the entities involved (i.e., teachers, students, truth, relativism and practice) and their environments (i.e., school and the world). In this way our inquiry is pragmatic because it takes this transaction as *given* in the very nature of its method. It asserts its usefulness via the concrete effects it exposes, and counts as real predicates only those effects which arise as the outcome of inquiry. The effects and outcomes are tantamount to conceivable possibilities, and thus enrich the meaning of our object as we are now in a position to do more with them than ever before.

In sum, pragmatism improves teaching philosophy and assists in its necessary reorientation towards a practice that is future-oriented and embedded within the context of life.
VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY


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