

Pragmatism and Semantic Particularism

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Abstract

Pragmatist views inspired by Peirce characterize the content of claims in terms of their practical consequences. The content of a claim is, on these views, determined by what actions are rationally recommended or supported by that claim. In this paper I examine the defeasibility of these relations of rational support. I will argue that such defeasibility introduces a particularist, occasion-sensitive dimension in pragmatist theories of content. More precisely, my conclusion will be that, in the sort of framework naturally derived from Peirce's pragmatist maxim, grasping conceptual contents is not merely a question of mastering general rules or principles codifying the practical import of claims, but decisively involves being sensitive to surrounding features of the particular situation at hand.

Keywords

Pragmatism, inferentialism, defeasible reasoning, particularism, occasion-sensitivity.

Pragmatist views inspired by Peirce characterize the content of claims in terms of their practical consequences. The content of a claim is, on these views, determined by what actions are rationally recommended or supported by that claim. In this paper I examine the defeasibility of these relations of rational support. I will argue that such defeasibility introduces a particularist, occasion-sensitive dimension in pragmatist theories of content. More precisely, my conclusion will be that, in the sort of framework naturally derived from Peirce's pragmatist maxim, grasping conceptual contents is not merely a question of mastering general rules or principles codifying the practical import of claims, but decisively involves being sensitive to surrounding features of the particular situation at hand.

The argument leading to these particularist conclusions can be

sketched as follows. In general, whether a given set of facts provides good reasons to act in some way (given certain goals) depends on the absence of obstacles or impediments — more broadly, on the absence of defeating conditions. Typically, the number of possible obstacles and impediments for the success of some action is indefinitely large, so agents cannot rule out all of them before deciding what to do. I will argue that agents are only required to discard explicitly the presence of a possible practical impediment if such a possibility is *relevant enough* — that is, if there are good reasons to suspect that such an impediment might take place. Whether the truth of some claim recommends a certain course of action (given the agent's goals) depends on whether the agent is in a position to rule out the presence of all relevant possible impediments for the success of such an action — while non-relevant impediments may remain unconsidered. In turn, whether a given possible impediment is relevant enough is determined, I will claim, by the circumstances surrounding the occasion of acting (for instance, by what environmental conditions are typical, by the information available to the agent and by practical features of the situation). Thus, in a pragmatist approach, grasping the content of a claim involves being sensitive to those features of the circumstances of action that make some possible impediments, and not others, relevant enough. In this way, intelligent thought and action rely crucially on occasion-sensitive skills, even if generalizations and (defeasible) principles are still allowed to play a significant role in explaining and guiding our reasoning and agency.

1 Pragmatist theories of content

Peirce's Pragmatist Maxim (PM) can be read as offering a characterization of the contents of beliefs or claims in terms of their practical consequences. This reading is naturally suggested by the following formulation of PM:

The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol. (Peirce 1998: 346)

An alternative formulation of PM presents this idea in an even

more striking way:

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood. (Peirce 1998: 134-135)

According to Peirce, thus, the content of a judgment is given by what it tells us to do — by the actions rationally recommended by such a judgement. For instance, if you judge that some berry is poisonous, then the rational thing for you to do is to refrain from eating it (at least if you do not want to be poisoned). Likewise, that the desk is on fire gives you reason to apply water to it (assuming that you do not want the house to burn down). These “practical maxims” would partially determine the content of the judgments that the berry is poisonous and that the desk is on fire, respectively.

In this way, Peirce can be seen as laying the foundations of a pragmatist semantic theory — more precisely, a pragmatist theory of content.¹ My purposes here are not exegetical, so I am not interested in defending the historical accuracy of this interpretation of Peirce’s views. My only claim is that this sort of pragmatist theory of content is naturally inspired by Peirce’s formulations of PM. This pragmatist theory can be generalized by taking the content of a claim to be characterized by its role in both practical and theoretical inferences (see Brandom 1994; also Sellars 1953). On this inferentialist view, claims have the content they have by virtue of serving as reasons for acting and also for accepting further claims. The content of a claim, therefore, is a matter of what further conclusions (theoretical and practical) may be inferred from it, and from what premises it may be inferred. This inferentialist view of content is the natural extension of Peirce’s pragmatism.

On the face of it, one could think that the sort of inferentialist-pragmatist position I have sketched endorses a *generalist* account of conceptual content. Semantic generalism can be roughly characterized as the view that semantic properties are determined by general

¹ For theories of content that can be seen as a development of Peirce’s insights, see Ramsey 1927, Sellars 1953, Brandom 1994, Whyte 1990, Dokic and Engel 2002, Blackburn 2010: chapter 10.

rules or principles (see Whiting 2007, 2010; Dancy 2004; Bergqvist 2009). Insofar as the pragmatist approach I have presented seems — at least at first glance — to specify the content of claims in terms of *general* inferential rules (or maxims, in Peirce's words), one could be tempted to classify it as a generalist perspective. Nevertheless I will argue that, on the contrary, pragmatist theories inspired by PM entail a form of semantic *particularism* (Dancy 2004) — that is, a view according to which understanding the content of a claim is not (at least only) a question of grasping general rules or principles, but also requires mastering occasion-sensitive skills.²

The source of this occasion-sensitivity is to be found, I will argue, in the fact that content-determining inferences are in general defeasible and subject to exceptions (in other words, they are non-monotonic inferences). It may come as a surprise that I appeal to the defeasibility of content-determining inferential rules in order to pinpoint the particularist nature of pragmatist-inferentialist accounts of content. After all, one could think that resorting to defeasible rules is precisely the best strategy for having rules that are still general but manage to accommodate the possibility of exceptions.³ However, I will contend that it is itself an occasion-sensitive issue which defeasible inferential rules are available in some particular situation. The same piece of reasoning may be (defeasibly) good on one occasion and enthymematic on another one — *even if no exception or obstacle is actually taking place on this latter occasion for acting*. Although this is so both for theoretical and practical inferences, I will focus on the latter, since they constitute the basis of pragmatist semantics.

2 The defeasibility of practical reasoning

Practical inferences are typically non-monotonic. The introduction of new premises (consistent with the old ones) may turn a good piece

² The contrast between generalism and particularism has been mainly developed in meta-ethical debates about the role played by principles in morality (see Dancy 2004, Väyrynen 2011, Hooker and Little 2000, Lance and Little 2006, McKeever and Ridge 2006, Thomas 2011).

³ Väyrynen (2009), for instance, develops a generalist theory of morality in terms of defeasible, hedged principles.

of practical reasoning into a bad one. An action that is recommended by a certain set of premises may stop being so recommended when a further premise is added. By contrast, the goodness of monotonic inferences cannot be revoked by the introduction of new premises (consistent with the old ones): in monotonic inferences, after introducing a new collateral premise, one can still infer everything that could be inferred before.

When the goodness of an inference is revoked by the introduction of additional premises, the inference is said to have been defeated; accordingly, these additional premises are usually known as defeaters. It is customary to make a distinction between two types of defeaters: rebutting defeaters and undercutting or disabling ones (Pollock 1987, Dancy 2004, Horty 2012).

Rebutting defeaters are countervailing reasons. One way in which a new premise may defeat the goodness of an inference is by providing stronger reasons against the conclusion. In this case, the old premises still give reasons in favor of the conclusion, but these reasons are outweighed by the defeating considerations. For instance, the fact that going to the cinema is fun gives me reasons to go to see a film; however, these reasons are outweighed by the fact that I need to stay at home working, which is a stronger reason against going to the cinema. The fact that watching a film would be fun still counts in favor of going to the cinema, but there are other considerations that count more strongly against doing so.

Another way in which a new premise may defeat the goodness of an inference is by *undercutting* it, that is by preventing the original premises from counting as offering good reasons in favor of the conclusion. After the introduction of the defeater, the other premises would stop providing reasons to perform the action previously recommended. Some fact p may be prevented from being a good reason to do A due to some further defeating fact q : p would count in favor of doing A in a situation where q did not obtain, but it does not so count if q obtains. I will focus here on this sort of defeating condition, usually known as undercutting defeater or disabler (see Dancy 2004, Pollock 1987).⁴

⁴ Dancy (2004) also distinguishes attenuators (considerations that attenuate the weight of some reason) and intensifiers (considerations that enhance the

An example of undercutting defeat in theoretical reasoning is the following. From the fact that a bottle of juice has been in the fridge for a couple of hours, one may *prima facie* conclude that the juice will be cold. However, this piece of reasoning becomes bad if the fridge was unplugged. If the fridge was actually unplugged, then the fact that a bottle has been in the fridge is not after all a reason to think that it is cold (the rational connection between that consideration and the conclusion that the bottle is cold has been undermined or disabled).

To be sure, if you do not know that the fridge is unplugged, it may appear to you that there are reasons to think that the bottle of juice is cold (since it has been in the fridge for a while). That is, you may have apparent or subjective reasons to endorse this conclusion — it may be reasonable for you to endorse it. Yet there will be no objective reasons favoring such a conclusion.⁵ The facts do not actually support it; indeed, the conclusion may be false (the bottle may actually be warm). In this sense, your inference was not good — its goodness was defeated. If you *did know* that the disabling defeater obtained (i.e. that the fridge was unplugged) then, on top of this, you were unreasonable, to the extent that you were endorsing a conclusion for which you thought there were no (undefeated) reasons.

Practical reasoning can also be undercut. I will focus on pieces of practical reasoning in which an action is recommended as a means for achieving some end. This type of reasoning will be undercut if there are obstacles or impediments thwarting the success of the action recommended as a means for the agent's end.

Consider the following example. The fact that the traffic light is red is, generally, a reason to press the brake pedal (in order to avoid

weight of some reason). Disablers (i.e. undercutting defeaters) could be seen as a limiting case of attenuators. Schroeder (2011) proposes to account for undercutting defeat generally in terms of attenuation.

⁵ For the distinction between objective and subjective or apparent reasons, see Álvarez 2010: 24, Parfit 2011: 33-35, Schroeder 2007: 14-15, Sylvan 2015 and Whiting 2014. As I will understand the distinction, objective reasons are facts that actually count in favor of some reaction. Subjective or apparent reasons are considerations that the subject takes to count in favor of some reaction — but it may be that they do not actually do so, in which case they are *merely apparent reasons*.

accidents). However, if the brake pedal happens to be disconnected from the car's brakes, there would not actually be good reasons to press the brake pedal (rather, there are reasons to use the hand brake or to drive the car into the field besides the road, so that you do not harm anyone). That the brake pedal is disconnected from the car brakes is an undercutting defeater for the original piece of reasoning — it is an impediment for the success of your attempt to slow down the car by pressing the brake pedal (although such an attempt would be successful in a situation where the pedal were properly connected to the car brakes).

Another example. The fact that the desk is on fire is a reason to apply water to the desk. But if the fire is electrical, then you actually have reasons not to apply water (it would be dangerous to do so). When the fire is electrical, applying water to it is not a good means to achieve the goal of extinguishing the fire.

A final example: that your friend is being threatened by some thugs is a reason to call the police. But if the police department is corrupt and allied with the thugs, then you do not have reasons to turn to the police, but rather to avoid doing so.

Note that in all these examples, the initial premises of your reasoning do not turn out to be false: it is true that the desk is on fire or that your friend is being threatened by thugs. What happens is that further facts (perhaps unknown to you) prevent such known premises from giving reasons to perform certain actions (e.g. to apply water to the desk, or to call the police). In general, whether a fact p is a reason for an agent to do A depends on certain defeating conditions not obtaining.

3 Relevant defeaters

One could argue that an agent is not entitled to perform a given action unless she has ruled out the presence of all possible defeaters for the reasons recommending her action. However, in many cases the number of possible defeaters seems to be indefinitely large; with some imagination, one can always come up with further defeating possibilities (see Brandom 2000). If this is the case — as I will assume —, then agents will not be in general in a position to rule out all possible defeaters (all possible impediments for the success

of their actions). Does this mean that practical reasoning is always enthymematic? I think not: it only means that our practical reasoning is usually defeasible. We often reason in absence of full information, but this does not make our reasoning enthymematic or defective (see Horty 2012: 81-91). Agents may be entitled to perform some action even if they have not ruled out all possible defeaters. Their entitlement, however, will be defeasible: it may be revoked if some defeating condition actually obtains.

Once it is granted that not all defeating possibilities have to be explicitly considered, the question that arises is which of such possibilities have to be ruled out by the premises of our reasoning and which may remain unconsidered in the background. My proposal is the following. In order to count as entitled to perform some action, I submit, agents only need to rule out defeating possibilities that are *relevant enough*, and I will take it that a defeating possibility is relevant enough if there are (strong enough) *reasons to suspect* that it may obtain. When relevant defeating possibilities are not ruled out, the agent will not count as having good reasons to endorse the conclusion of her practical reasoning — her piece of practical reasoning will be enthymematic (even if said defeating possibilities did not actually obtain). It will not be rational to act guided by certain apparent reasons if you have good reasons to suspect that defeating conditions for those reasons may obtain. In contrast, irrelevant possible defeaters may remain unconsidered without making the inference enthymematic — they can be properly ignored (for the notion of properly ignoring, see Lewis 1996, Blome-Tillmann 2009, McKenna 2014).

When is a possible defeating condition relevant? I will argue that it depends on the circumstances surrounding the occasion of action, including contextual and practical factors.

4 The occasion-sensitivity of reasons for action

I have claimed that only relevant defeating possibilities need to be ruled out, and that a defeating possibility is relevant if there are reasons to suspect that it may obtain. Plausibly, whether there are reasons to have such suspicions depends on surrounding features of the occasion of action. More specifically, I submit, it will depend on

whether the occurrence of the defeater is likely enough or rationally expectable in the circumstances in which the action is to be carried out.

One first factor that arguably has a say on the relevance of a defeating possibility is what conditions are typical in the environment in which the action is to be performed. For instance, if electrical fires are very rare in a given environment (say, there is no electrical equipment around), then the agent will be entitled to apply water to a fire without being required to discard the possibility that its origin is electrical. However, in an environment where electrical fires are common, this possibility will be relevant and agents will have to rule it out before counting as having reasons to apply water to a fire.

So, if a defeater is likely to obtain in the sort of environment in which an action takes place, such a defeater needs to be explicitly considered — there are reasons to suspect that it may obtain. This is analogous to what happens in epistemology with fake barn scenarios (see Goldman 1976). The standard appraisal of such scenarios is that, if the agent happens to be in a fake-barn county environment (where fake barns are frequent), she needs to be in a position to discard the defeating possibility that she is facing a fake barn, in order to count as knowing (in virtue of her visual perception) that there is a barn in front of her; however, the agent is not required to be in a position to rule out such a defeating possibility when she is in ordinary environments, where fake barns are rare. Practical reasoning, I have argued, is sensitive to environmental conditions in an analogous way.

Furthermore, whether some defeating possibility is relevant will plausibly also depend on the information accessible to the agent. In particular, information contextually available may alter the likelihood (in relation to the agent's perspective) of certain possible defeaters, and thereby modify the relevance of such possibilities. For example, if you do not know that you are in "harmless snake island" (where snakes are in general harmless), you will have reasons to suspect that a snake may be venomous: given your information, it is a relevant possibility (let us assume that the larger world you inhabit is such that snakes are usually dangerous). However, this possibility stops being relevant — or at least becomes less relevant — if you know that you are in "harmless snake island".

One may even argue that false or misleading information can

make some defeating possibility relevant for an agent. Suppose that you have convincing information (coming from a generally reliable source) suggesting that the police department may be corrupt and allied with the thugs of the city. Then you will have reasons to regard this possibility as relevant — to *suspect that it may be* the case —, even if the information is in fact misleading and the police department is not, and has never been, corrupt.

Moreover, it seems that whether a defeating possibility is relevant *enough* to merit consideration will depend on practical issues, such as how high stakes are and the costs associated with the agent's decision. This is analogous to the sensitivity of knowledge claims to practical factors (as discussed, among others, by Fantl and McGrath (2009) and Stanley (2005)). To take a well-known example: if the consequences of not going to the bank before Monday are catastrophic, one will need to rule out additional defeating possibilities before being entitled to conclude that one can wait until Saturday to go to the bank (since it was open last Saturday). For instance, one may need to make sure that the bank has not changed its time-table — whereas in low stakes circumstances it may be rational to wait until Saturday even if this possibility has not been considered.

Similarly, imagine that the consequences of your eating nuts are only mildly negative (you do not like the taste); then, reading in the menu that some salad is nut-free could be enough to be entitled to conclude that you may eat the salad. If, on the contrary, ingesting nuts would have dreary results (say, you are allergic) you may need to discard further possibilities that in more relaxed contexts could remain unconsidered (for instance, the possibility that the menu is out of date, or that the cook has made some mistake when preparing the salad).

Arguably, practical stakes and costs do not affect so much the strength of the reasons to suspect that some defeater may obtain, but rather how strong these reasons must be in order for the defeater to require explicit consideration. Practical factors would contribute to fixing the threshold of relevance below which a defeating possibility may remain unconsidered (in high stakes contexts the threshold will be lower). In this way, practical factors do not seem to alter the level of support offered by the premises of the agent's reasoning; nevertheless, these factors plausibly have a say in determining

whether such level of support is enough for the agent to be rationally entitled to endorse the conclusion (i.e. to act on it). An action recommended by the agent's evidence may stop being so recommended in an alternative context in which practical stakes are higher (even if no impediments actually obtain in either of the contexts).

5 Practical defeasibility and the occasion-sensitivity of pragmatist semantics

I have argued that whether some known facts give good reasons to perform a certain action depends on the circumstances surrounding the occasion of action — it depends on what defeating possibilities are relevant enough from the perspective of the context in which the practical deliberation is being carried out (and perhaps assessed). In this way, the goodness of inferential relations of rational support (i.e. what is a good reason for what) is sensitive to contextual factors.⁶

A consequence of this is that pragmatist theories of content turn out to be occasion-sensitive as well. These theories characterize the content of claims in terms of their role in theoretical and practical reasoning, in particular in terms of the conclusions that may be inferred from them. But it follows from the discussion above that the same practical inference may be good in a given context and enthymematic in another one, even if no obstacle is actually present in either context. This is so because in some contexts agents will need to rule out defeating possibilities that in other contexts are not relevant and, therefore, can remain unconsidered without making the agent's reasoning enthymematic (e.g. in some contexts but not others one will be required to rule out the possibility of the fire having electrical origin, before being entitled to conclude that applying water to the desk is a "mode of rational conduct" which ensues from knowing that the desk is on fire).

Thus, pragmatism provides a particularist, occasion-sensitive view of content. The reason-giving relations that, on these views, determine content are occasion-sensitive and cannot be captured

⁶ It must be noted this global conclusion about practical reasoning is compatible with claiming that there are some undefeasible general moral principles (say, the principle that it is wrong to kill innocent people).

by a generalist model — content-determining rational relations are holistic, in the sense that they are underpinned by a background of (typically indefinitely many) anti-defeating conditions. This does not mean, however, that general rules have no place in a pragmatist framework. Defeasible, general rules still guide our reasoning and action, although occasion-sensitive skills are required in order to appreciate whether one is in the sort of context where a certain defeasible general rule *prima facie* applies.

Take the rule that one should call the police when threatened by thugs. In ordinary contexts, it seems rational to follow this general rule. However, there may be further contexts in which members of the police are typically corrupt and therefore such a rule does not apply; actually, in these contexts it could be that the rule that should be generally applied is to avoid the police when threatened by thugs. A competent reasoner must be able to adjust her reasoning dispositions appropriately when perceiving this sort of contextual change.

One possible way for the pragmatist to incorporate this occasion-sensitivity is to say that the content of claims depends on the context of action — the sentence ‘The desk is on fire’ would express different contents in contexts where the possibility that the fire has electrical origins is relevant and in contexts where it is not. This will be problematic if one favors a view in which communication requires being able to share and transmit common contents across different practical contexts.

An alternative possibility is to take the content of claims to remain constant across practical contexts, even if their practical consequences may vary. The content of a claim would be characterized as a function from practical contexts (and goals) to actions licensed. Grasping the content of a claim would amount to knowing what actions it recommends on each practical context (given the agent’s goals and collateral beliefs). Although this function would be context-invariant, in order for an agent to be able to properly think and talk in accordance to it, she would need to be sufficiently sensitive to the relevant contextual features (e.g. typical environmental conditions, how high stakes are) that determine the practical consequences of the claim on a given occasion. The resulting pragmatist view would still require that competent users of conceptual contents master certain occasion-sensitive skills.

These proposals for modelling the occasion-sensitivity of pragmatist semantics certainly need to be further developed and discussed; however, this is something that lies beyond the scope of this paper. My purpose has been more modest: I have tried to show that a pervasive form of occasion-sensitivity arises in pragmatist semantic theories that characterize the content of claims in terms of their involvement in defeasible practical reasoning.

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