

Pragmatic Epistemology, Community, and the Problem of Solipsism

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(Abstract)

A distinctive feature that separates pragmatism from traditional epistemological positions is its turn to a *community* of inquirers. The community, as understood by pragmatists, is not merely a collection of individuals, though this is certainly part of the story. Rather, 'community' refers to a much more refined philosophical notion. The community is a framework of rules and standards for proper inference, judgments, and conduct that are determined by inquirers who share membership in a group. In turning to the community, pragmatists reject the methodological individualism of epistemological models produced under the influence of Descartes, and maintain that knowledge can only be secured in an intersubjective context within which substantive discussion and criticism are promoted and conducted. Pragmatists such as Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, and Wilfrid Sellars and contemporary descendents of pragmatism like Wilfrid Sellars embraced the notion of community and developed the crucial role it plays in evaluating knowledge claims. The aim of this thesis is two-fold. I examine critically the role the community plays in pragmatic epistemology by looking closely at the philosophies of Charles S. Peirce and Wilfrid Sellars. Additionally, I examine whether the turn to community enables pragmatists to respond to philosophical problems that have been hitherto unanswerable by models of knowledge that restrict their focus to the individual. Specifically, I look closely at the problem of solipsism and examine whether pragmatists have the resources for responding to this problem successfully. It is my hope that by undertaking this project we will obtain a clearer picture of pragmatic epistemology and some of the strengths in following pragmatists in making the turn to community.

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