

## Except for Truth: The Pragmatist Epistemology of Karl Popper

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Sir Karl Popper (1902–1994) was a pragmatist — except, that is, for his conception of truth. There are broad and intensive parallels between Popperian philosophy of science and Pragmatism (specifically that of William James and F.C.S. Schiller), though Popper’s notion of truth differs from the pragmatic view considerably. While Popper understood truth to be absolute, transcendent, and a ‘regulatory ideal’ that we can never know for certain we have attained, Pragmatism views truth as mutable, imminent, and necessarily possessed by human knowers, if it is attained at all. Since Pragmatism is largely defined by its unique theory of truth, the adoption of an alternate theory would seem to conclusively disqualify one from being counted as a pragmatist. I argue, however, that for Popper this is not the case for the following reasons:

- (a) Popper’s conception of truth amounts to not much more than what I call a *stylistic metaphysical axiom*, a basic metaphysical tenet that, once adopted, semantically frames downstream epistemic concepts in definite ways, but nevertheless does not result in a cancellation of their pragmatic import.
- (b) According to explicit statements made by James and Schiller, the adoption of an alternate metaphysics does not necessarily exclude one from being considered a pragmatist.
- (c) The abstract and removed metaphysical notion of truth that Popper espouses has a similar cash value (practical significance) to that of an explicitly pragmatic theory of truth and Popper’s well-known proposal of ‘verisimilitude’ is actually the seat of his pragmatism.

As such, on account of his approach to scientific practice and the development of human knowledge, Popper should be viewed as a pragmatist, and his work should be, in the words of Phillips (1975) embraced as “an important development of pragmatism.”<sup>1</sup>

My plan, for either a short presentation or poster (though I would prefer the former) is:

1. Provide a brief overview of some of the parallels between Popperian philosophy and Pragmatism, e.g. life as problem-solving, the need for bold hypothesizing, knowledge as conjectural, a trial-and-error view of knowledge development, the importance of falsification/falsifiability, the stopping or pausing of inquiry due to ‘satisfaction,’ a broader account of ‘experience,’ and the adoption of indeterminism.

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, D.C, “Popper and Pragmatism: A Fantasy,” *Educational Theory*, 25 (1975): 88.

2. Unpack the central difference between Popper and the pragmatists (i.e. his conception of truth) and explain how it metaphysically frames downstream epistemic concepts (e.g. knowledge, justification, verification) but does not undermine them as pragmatistic. Also, I will propose a reason why Popper did not consider himself to be a pragmatist.

3. Show how Popper's conception of truth and the pragmatic theory of truth have the same practical significance and that, by James's and Schiller's own lights, the adoption of an alternative metaphysic does not necessarily exclude one from being counted as a pragmatist.

As such, I conclude that, on thoroughly epistemological grounds, Popper ought to be duly counted as a properly pragmatist philosopher of science, albeit with a strange and innocuous conception of truth.