Letting Reality Bite: A Peircean Approach to Teaching Undergraduate Epistemology

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1) Introduction:

Academic philosophers who have a research passion for Peirce and who suspect that he has the potential to revolutionize philosophy sometimes wonder how they might bring his ideas more into the teaching of undergraduates – where he frequently doesn't feature at all, except in the US where a token coverage of his early papers seems to result largely from patriotism.

Much could be said about specific Peircean ideas and theories which, if included in philosophy curricula, would expand and complicate the vision of philosophy to which students are exposed, and would most likely be greatly appreciated by many who feel troubled and undermined by a sense of narrowness in the current curriculum which they lack the resources to articulate.[1] Just a few examples are Peirce's understanding of pragmatism as a faith in the capacity of experimentation to deliver stable answers to our questions which – in ironic contrast to an understanding of pragmatism as a claim of 'anything-goes' – is in fact the most complete form of realism, his belief in final causes and its potential to resurrect ethical realism against positivism's lingering nihilist onslaught, his distinctive objective idealism, so illuminatingly intermingled with his vision of (mathematical, logical and metaphysical) 'continuity', his belief in real chance, and his most elegant and ambitious theory of signs.

Having said all this, however, in my opinion the most valuable legacy Peirce has given me as a teacher of undergraduate philosophy is not any of his *theories* but one of his *instructions*. I speak of course of his *pragmatic maxim:*

[1] At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, as not all of these students remain in the profession, this is an issue of 'life or death' career-wise.

> "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, 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, *Collected Papers*, 5.2).

Increasingly I have come to feel that if pragmatism makes no conceivable difference to my teaching practice, teaching it involves me in a performative contradiction.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which concerns itself with *knowledge* (at least etymologically). We often advertise epistemology courses promising that we will address such questions as:

- What is reality?
- When and how can we say that we have knowledge of reality?
- Is knowledge, or what is real, relative to a cultural perspective?

Many students enrol with enthusiasm to explore these questions. The life-stage of a typical undergraduate is often very stressful and confusing, involving decisions about lifelong career path, a first engagement with adult relationships, and further issues of significance. In the face of this, surely a greater understanding of what is and is not *known*, and what is and is not *real* would help, it is thought.

However what do these students commonly encounter? An introduction to epistemology *via* a question of *global skepticism*, which, it is claimed, derives from Descartes, "the father of modern philosophy". If global skepticism could be put in the form of a question, it would be something like:

GS1: Is the entire world real or is the entire world not real?

GS2: Do we know what we think we know or do we know nothing at all?

At this point, key texts either emphasize the questions and their overwhelming difficulty,[2] or begin proffering the author's own answers[3] (arguably replacing global

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[2] Just a few examples: "The skeptical conclusion is that knowledge is impossible. No one *does* know, because no one *can* know." Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Wiley, 1991), p. 1.

"Philosophical skepticism['s] essential element is a general view about human knowledge….the philosophical sceptic holds, or at least finds irrefutable, the view that knowledge is *impossible*." Michael Williams, "Skepticism", *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Wiley, 2007), p. 35.

"General epistemology will be concerned with questions, such as…'Are there general reasons to think knowledge of any kind is unobtainable?' David Cooper, *Epistemology: The Classic Readings* (Blackwell, 1999), p. 2

[3] Again, a few examples chosen at random: "As I look at the green field before me, I might believe not only that there is a green field there but also that I *see* one. And I do see one. I visually perceive it…Both beliefs, the belief that there is a green field there, and the self-referential belief that *I* see one, are grounded,

skepticism with global dogmatism). Of course some philosophers do critique the central role given to global skepticism in epistemology[4], but such nuances rarely find their way into introductory courses in the subject.

If we return to the pragmatic maxim, what conceivable practical[5] difference does it make in the life of a typical undergraduate if the answers to questions GS1 and GS2 are yes or no? For instance, if the entire world is not real, how might this affect my choice of career? One could argue at great length about whether any two issues are really unconnected if one only does enough philosophy, and about the desirability of pursuing 'Topics of Vital Importance' as opposed to general questions considered for their own sake. However in the context of teaching introductory philosophy, the bottom line is that in my experience students can't see connections between GS1 and GS2 and their own experience, even if they try quite hard. Therefore I am embarrassed to teach this material. The worst consequence, in my opinion, is that as the best students usually desire to follow and please the teacher, when presented with this material they learn to *feign interest in questions which they cannot connect to any possible experience*. This impacts profoundly on their philosophical development. From the Peircean perspective, which seeks to find and foster 'living' over 'paper' doubt, this is arguably a form of intellectual corruption, and as such a betrayal of students' trust.

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causally, justificationally, and epistemically, in my visual experience. They are produced by that experience, justified by it, and constitute knowledge in virtue of it." Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1998), p, 14.

"Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist who, although writing well before the Enlightenment, had the courage and audacity to challenge the validity of all his beliefs, including his belief in God. Ironically, in pursuing the farthest reaches of what can be doubted, Descartes found the basis of knowledge itself." Linda Martin Alcoff (ed), *Epistemology: The Big Questions* (Blackwell, 1998), p. 3.

[4] Thus for instance, John Greco denies that the task of epistemology should any longer consist in refuting skepticism in his introduction to the *Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (2007). Barry Stroud writes, "Scepticism is most illuminating when restricted to particular areas of knowledge ... because it then rests on distinctive and problematic features of the alleged knowledge in question, not simply on some completely general conundrum in the notion of knowledge itself…", Barry Stroud, "Scepticism, 'Externalism', and the Goal of Epistemology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1994), p. 291. Christopher Hookway's book *Scepticism* also deserves mention for a careful rereading of Descartes which plausibly suggests that even he did not advocate the kind of global skepticism typically put forward in introductory epistemology classes. Hookway and others are part of a recent trend towards 'virtue epistemology' (inspired by pragmatism, insights from virtue ethics and feminist critiques of traditional epistemology) which seeks to replace investigation into *knowledge* with investigation of *knowers* and their 'intellectual character'. But the question remains how these new theories might affect teaching *practice.*

[5] The meaning of 'practical' here includes barring clearly pathological responses, such as refusing to act, or ending one's life.

Therefore I have been experimenting with other options for teaching epistemology, guided by the pragmatic maxim. It seems to me that rather than presenting general questions and theories, and merely hoping that students will make the connection to specific examples which will render the general material meaningful, it is imperative to (at least some of the time) start from specific examples, ensure students are thinking about them, and move *from there* towards general questions and theories. Therefore, here is a teaching experiment I have devised. I invite you to try it in your own classroom and see what happens.[6]

2) The Exercise:

i) Props:

First I produce slips of paper and invite the students to select one each. (Rhetorically, this already creates an air of mystery and direct engagement, a bit like a reality TV show.)

Each slip contains a word or phrase describing one 'thing'. Here is my list:

i. a tree
ii. the number five
iii. the color red
iv. your friendship with your best friend
v. a song (think of an example…)
vi. a website
vii. World War Two
viii. the New Zealand dollar
ix. a book (e.g. 'Moby Dick')
x. Gandalf
xi. a hammer
xii. the time you will wake up tomorrow
xiii. the last dream you can remember having
xiv. a marriage

[6] I would also be most interested to hear your 'experimental results'. Feel free to email them to me: clegg@waikato.ac.nz.

xv. pain

xvi. the word 'cat'

xvii. fashionability (coolness)

xviii. Mount Everest

xix. Queen Elizabeth the First

ii) Instructions:

Once they all have slips of paper, I give them a two-stage set of instructions as to what to do with them. In the first stage I ask that they each come to a decision on their own about whether the item on their slip is:

- **'real',**
- **'not real',**
- **'partly real' (in which case say which part)**
- **'it depends' (in which case say what 'it' depends on).**

This ensures that each student has done at least some thinking of their very own about one specific example (for which they are uniquely responsible). I also ask them to 'give a reason' for their answer. This instruction is intended to start the philosophical process – asking for 'a reason' being the most unthreatening and natural way I have found to do this. I typically allocate this stage 5-10 minutes.

Students' consideration of the items above in this light will be found to spontaneously give rise to many classic philosophical issues. For instance, xix) and xii) raise the questions of the reality of the past and future, while x) broaches the reality of fictional characters. Issues of functionalist as opposed to classically materialist identity can be explored *via* xi) for artifacts and i) for living things. Interesting questions (arguably neglected by mainstream philosophy) surround the nature and reality of 'social forms' such as marriage and the NZ dollar. Related are issues of the reality of signs which arise from songs, words, websites and books, along with some rather insistent and intriguing token – type issues. (By 'Moby Dick' do we mean an individual book copy, or do we mean something more, and if so, what?) Finally, xiii) and xv) link to classic Cartesian questions concerning the reality and reliability of individual experience.

In the second stage, I get them in groups of four (a number I have found to be large enough to generate a genuine discussion on an interesting range of examples, but small enough that all students in the group are likely to participate), and ask them to devise a joint definition of the term 'real'. I stress that their definition must 'cover all the things you said were real, and not cover any of the things you said were not real'. They will inevitably find this an extremely challenging task! I drift randomly past groups and listen, fostering discussion by asking questions, or dropping in a new slip of paper with a further example for them to incorporate. I also deliver a wealth of encouragement, assuring them that the exercise *is* hard, and that engaging in the discussion process is the most important thing, though it might feel uncomfortable at first as they are probably used to being told more what to think than is currently happening. The last time I tried this exercise, however, the students engaged happily in discussion for the rest of the class (around 35 minutes), and I had to interrupt them to clear the room for the next class (a rare occurrence at my University).

iii) Follow-up:

The biggest challenge with this kind of exercise is the converse of that of traditional teaching – namely making the link from specific examples and discussions back to those canonical general ideas and theories with which we feel it is our duty to acquaint students. To this end, I have devised a follow-up exercise. In the next class I get each group to state the best definition of reality they can agree on, list them all on the board and encourage general discussion on which definition might be the best (and, importantly, why). Facilitating such an exercise is not easy as I find by this point the groups have generated such a profusion of interesting philosophical arguments on different topics that integrating them can be quite a challenge. With practice, however, one learns to harmonize and develop some useful maximum of the contributions, using something like the philosophical equivalent of jazz improvisation (where traditional teaching is a classical music performance).

It is very useful to write down and keep the definitions as a resource to refer back to in future classes. (For example, when introducing Berkeley one might say, "You remember how in the first class one group defined reality as …Berkeley agrees with this insofar

as…"[7]). I confess that although I am now committed to beginning epistemology courses with exercises such as these, at present I revert to something much closer to traditional lecturing style after the initial two classes. *Entirely* structuring an epistemology course from specific living examples to general theories would be an interesting experiment – perhaps something of a Holy Grail of pragmatist teaching. As mentioned above, one would have to let the presently canonical theories of academic epistemology fall where they may and it is an interesting question how much would survive and whether that would be a good or bad thing.[8]

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[7] The last time I tried this exercise, 3 out of 5 definitions of reality the groups came up with were extremely Berkeleian, which was rather unexpected and interesting.

[8] I am indebted to the Philosophy for Children community in Australia and New Zealand (particularly Vanya Kovach) both for helpful discussions on the issues discussed above and some very practical pedagogical tips. Matthew Lipman's pioneering work writing teaching materials for doing philosophy with children of all ages (which he developed in conscious deference to classic American pragmatism, in particular Peirce's idea of the 'community of inquiry') really opened my eyes to the possibility of 'bottom-up' as opposed to 'top-down' philosophical inquiry.

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