Fallibilism Entails Pluralism

by

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, Ph. D.
Associate Professor
University of Tennessee
Cultural Studies
Knoxville, TN 37996-2700
(w)865-974-9505
(h)865-560-9050
fax#865-974-8981
E-mail: bthayer@utk.edu

Prepared for
American Educational Studies Association
Annual Conference, Vancouver, BC, Canada
November 1-5, 2000
Paper Presentation
Biography: Barbara Thayer-Bacon is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Cultural Studies, University of Tennessee. Her primary areas of scholarship are philosophy of education, critical thinking, epistemology, feminist theory, and educational reform.

Fallibilism Entails Pluralism

INTRODUCTION

Harvey Siegel tells us he embraces Peirce's theory of fallibilism (belief in the impossibility of attaining knowledge that is certain), and he claims most philosophers today do so as well.¹ Yet, within classic pragmatism there is disagreement on what fallibilism entails and these disagreements still exist today between current pragmatist philosophers. In their own lifetimes Peirce, and Dewey each published essays publicly declaring their views differed from each other, and from James, while James tended to consider his views as being in alignment with both Peirce and Dewey. It appears today that James and Dewey were more in agreement, and they both differed from Peirce. The difference lies in their ontology in relation to their epistemology, for Peirce fought to hang on to a concept of absolutism, and James and Dewey worked to dissolve the absolutism/relativism dichotomy, each in their own unique ways.²

Charlene Haddock Seigfried defines pragmatism as embracing fallibilism and pluralism (belief in the impossibility of attaining knowledge that is universal).³ While this is true for James and Dewey, this does not accurately describe Peirce's position. Peirce strove to distinguish his pragmaticism from pragmatism because pragmatism had come to denote a concern with actions/events and to be associated with pluralism and the qualified relativism it implies.⁴ Peirce postulates a real world that is mind-independent: "That is real which has such and such characters, whether anybody thinks it to have
those characters or not. At any rate, that is the sense in which the pragmaticist uses the word." 5 Peirce also holds to the existence of universals and general principles operative in nature. "Despite his stress on the contingency and revisability of scientific claims and theories, Peirce preserves the permanency and independence of what those claims and theories are about." 6 Thus, we can describe Peirce as offering a non-vulgar absolutism, for he clearly recognizes historical contingency and contextuality, the fallibility of inquirers, and the need to provide a method for achieving revisability of knowledge-claims. Peirce insists on the need for continual critical assessment of epistemological criteria that are corrigible, and he turns to the scientific method and logic to fulfill that need. Yet, Peirce preserves a final grounding of knowledge claims in his postulation of real existents and the "external permanency," which exits independent of human thought. Peirce offered a theory of synechism, which was "intended to connect the real--...with what is 'destined' to be believed as a consequence of the continuity of experimental inquiry." 7 Chris McCarthy labels Peirce's view "pragmatic realism." 8 Unfortunately, Peirce's hold on to a destined reality that is mind-independent points us back to the binary logic of absolutism/relativism that James and Dewey worked so hard to dissolve.

Dewey credits Peirce as being "notable among writers on logical theory for his explicit recognition of the necessity of the social factor in the determination of evidence and its probative force." 9 Peirce did not think truth is found by one person seeking it on his own, it is found by us testing out our ideas with others, as a community of scholars. 10 Since individual's are limited, contextual beings who are fallible, it is only possible to get closer, and clearer on our understanding of Truth if we are able to explain and test out our ideas with others. Ideally, we learn and share what we learn with others, as a community of scholars seeking Truth, and working together toward that goal.
However, Peirce carefully restricts his community of scholars to scientists who are involved in rational inquiry and are considered experts in their fields of study. Given Peirce's pragmatic realism and his doctrine of synechism, it makes sense that it is only important to him to include those who are considered most knowledgable in discussions attempting to further advance knowledge. Peirce does not describe "others" (nonexperts) as needing to be necessarily included in the discussion for not everyone has the background knowledge necessary to do the investigating. Unfortunately, Peirce's community of scholars is not friendly to feminists, for science has a long history of excluding women and not considering them as equal members of the scholastic community (as does philosophy). This exclusionary move by Peirce is one that has the dangerous potential of limiting our inquiring as well as reassuring inquirers they need not worry about trying to negotiate with others who are not considered members of the scientific community.

I want to use this paper to argue that (e)pistemological fallibilism (belief in the impossibility of attaining knowledge that is certain) entails the need to embrace pluralism in the sense of including others, outsider views, in the inquiry process. I make this argument not just on moral grounds, for I certainly agree that it is morally wrong to exclude others, but I want to make this argument on epistemological grounds as well. My argument will be based on the position that (e)pistemological fallibilism entails (e)pistemological pluralism (belief in the impossibility of attaining knowledge that is universal), in agreement with James and contra to Peirce. My argument has tremendous educational implications that I will turn to at the end. Harvey Siegel has recently made an argument against inclusion on epistemic grounds, fairly representing Peirce's community of scholars view, so my plan is to begin with Siegel's position. Then I will consider feminist contributions to this debate, as qualified relativists. By the end, it should be clear what my qualified relativist position is, and how it differs from Siegel's
non-vulgar absolutism. Our differences follow the same lines as that which distinguishes Peirce from James and Dewey.

FALLIBILISM DOES NOT ENTAIL PLURALISM

Peirce uses the standard of relevant qualifications or expertise to exclude "nonexperts." Given Harvey Siegel's agreement with Peirce's pragmatic realism and his doctrine of synechism, it should come as no surprise that Siegel presents a present day argument that exclusion on the basis of lack of relevant qualifications or expertise, or failure to meet relevant standards, is both permissible and consistent with the ideal of inclusion. Let's trace the lines of Siegel's argument. In his Presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society in 1995, "What Price Inclusion?," Siegel defines inclusionary discourses and theories as "discourses which seek out, make room for, and take seriously, and theories which adequately reflect, the voices, views, and interests of all, especially those who are and have traditionally been excluded from discussion and/or consideration" (p. 168). He argues, ala Kant, that we should endorse the ideal of inclusion on moral grounds. To exclude is to fail to treat people with respect. However, he goes on to argue that we should not endorse inclusion on epistemic grounds, that "inclusive theories are not in general more likely than exclusive theories to be true, or justified, and inclusive discourses are not in general more likely than exclusive discourses to yield such epistemically worthy theories; there is no necessary connection between inclusion and epistemic worthiness, or between exclusion and epistemic defectiveness" (p. 171).

Siegel turns to science for examples to show that common shared beliefs people held have not yielded Truth but rather have turned out to be false (e.g. the earth is flat, handling frogs causes warts). Siegel also turns to science for examples that exclusion does not necessarily lead to false claims (e.g. many of the claims of contemporary science which were forged in exclusionary discourses, yet enjoy impressive epistemic
credentials, such as jet airplanes and radio transmissions). He concludes: "Since inclusion is routinely conjoined with epistemic weakness, and exclusion with epistemic strength, it is a mistake to regard inclusion as an epistemic virtue. Rather, inclusion is a moral virtue, and should be valued as such" (p. 172). While Siegel is not willing to grant that people and groups deserve inclusion because of any special epistemic privilege they enjoy, or because including them necessarily increases the probability of obtaining true or justified theories, he is willing to acknowledge that "inclusion, by adding previously ignored perspectives to scientific research and debate, can and often does serve to correct and enhance ongoing theorizing" (p. 172). However Siegel considers this qualification a matter of principles of conduct for inquiry, not criteria of evaluation of the products of inquiry. Any theory can be defective, and not necessarily because it has been exclusive, but for many reasons, including lack of information, inadequate sources of evidence, etc. And inclusive theories can also be defective, due to lack of imagination or failure to criticize theoretical presuppositions, for example (p. 172).

Siegel is willing to admit that mainstream philosophy excludes others by relying of disciplinary standards that are portrayed as unbiased and neutral, which in fact are not. He credits recent feminist scholarship for exposing the ways in which extant standards are defective. The admittance of faulty standards should lead us to conclude the need to reject our current standards for ones that are superior, not to reject standards altogether. For, as Siegel rightly points out, standards are needed to make the case for inclusion. This is a "false worry" on Siegel's part as no one suggests we should reject standards altogether. Rather, others insist on the need to recognize that our standards are faulty.

Siegel also admits, "there is a genuine tension between inclusion and one common standard, namely that of qualifications or expertise" (p. 181). He argues that not everyone is qualified or competent to participate in some discourses, and on the grounds of (lack of) appropriate expertise, exclusion is perfectly legitimate. "(F)or
conversations to be maximally functional, or maximally interesting, informative, or communicative for their participants, some potential participants may well be best left out" (p. 182). Thus, he concludes: "Exclusion on the basis of lack of relevant qualifications or expertise, or failure to meet relevant standards, is both permissible and consistent with the ideal of inclusion" (p. 182). At the same time, Siegel hastens to add that if someone feels wrongfully excluded, they can protest and "try to show how their exclusion is in some way or other unjust or otherwise mistaken." He suggests that the way to protest one's exclusion is "by arguing that she is in fact qualified and sufficiently expert to be entitled to participate" (p. 182). He also adds that for many discourses everyone is qualified, and conversations can be expanded in ways that require the inclusion of more people, as well as people can acquire expertise and thus come to merit inclusion. "The point remains nevertheless that for some conversations, exclusion is perfectly legitimate on the basis of (lack of) appropriate expertise" (p. 182).

**FALLIBILISM DOES ENTAIL PLURALISM**

As a feminist, I have to point out the dangers of Siegel's argument. Siegel admits that philosophy and science have both used standards to exclude women from the conversations. These sexist practices continue today. Just recently the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) admitted to current sexist practices in its treatment of its few women scientists on its campus. Siegel admits that the more recent inclusion of women in philosophical and scientific conversations has helped philosophers and scientists become more aware of their own biases. Doesn't this improved awareness of biases constitute an example in favor of inclusion on epistemic grounds?

Siegel admits that standards are fallible and that someone can be wrongfully excluded due to misjudgment of lacking expertise based on faulty qualifications. Women have only recently been allowed to ride in space shuttles or pilot jet planes. In the past they have been judged inferior and inadequate for these tasks because of a variety of reasons, using physical, psychological, and logical criteria, all of which have
been proven to be false. In fact, women have proved themselves superior at these tasks, with equal access to education and training. How does one ever get to question the criteria used to determine the relevant qualifications of expertise if outsider views are not included? How do we become aware of our own faulty biases and the hidden assumptions our standards impose on all to the advantage of some and the disfavor of others? Again we find a value for inclusion on epistemic grounds for inclusion is what allows us the means to question the accepted standards for judging.

Siegel is correct to point out that including others does not guarantee Truth, just about any example would do to support his claim since we are continually adjusting and adapting our theories as we seek the ever-elusive Truth. However, he is wrong to think that exclusion leads to Truth. The examples "that enjoy impressive credentials" which Siegel points to (e.g. jet airplanes and radio transmissions) do not look so impressive when they are viewed from outsider perspectives. Jet airplanes look like major polluters of our air and significant users of our limited fossil fuels. Radios look like capitalist exploitation of cheap labor in colonized Third World nations where the radios are manufactured. The splitting of the atom may look like an impressive scientific contribution toward a new source of energy, from a United States perspective, but it looks like radioactive fallout, environmental destruction, and the decimation of thousands of people's lives from a Japanese perspective. These examples show us that exclusion is dangerous and that while it may not lead to false claims, a small group of scientists did learn how to split the atom, it certainly leads to claims with a much wider range of significance than any one group of scientists can fathom, wisely consider, and critique.

What about Siegel's conduct/product distinction, in which he acknowledges that inclusion does serve to correct and enhance ongoing theorizing but this has to do with principles of conduct for inquiry, not criteria of evaluation of the products of inquiry? What we find here is that Siegel attempts to draw a sharp distinction between ethical
behavior and epistemological results, as if how we treat each other in our inquiring is not related to the results we find from our inquiring. However, the very work Siegel points to, work by Bordo, Keller, Harding, Longino, and Nelson belies this distinction. These feminist scientists have contributed significantly to the reshaping of their fields of study, as well as to adaption and changes in methods of inquiry within their fields. Recent changes in how we conduct research in psychology, biology, anthropology, and education, for example, have caused significant changes in the research results.

Indeed, tremendous changes have occurred in educational research due to the uses of newer qualitative research methodologies, which dominate educational research today. In the past, researchers in education have tried to follow the principles of conduct for inquiry established by scientific quantitative researchers, only to find the products of their research very limited due to the innumerable variables a teacher in a classroom of 30 children present. Because there have been changes involving the criteria for evaluating the products of inquiry, we now find qualitative research techniques such as case studies, interviews, and focus groups count as sound methods of inquiry. Due to changes in the criteria for what counts as evidence or data, personal letters and diaries count as evidence in research studies today, for example. Education now finds itself in a position where teachers' experiences in the classroom are no longer just viewed as antidotal, personal witnessing, but teachers are considered researchers. Due to changes in our standards for research, researchers can now go into the classroom and study what teachers and students do in their natural setting, and have their work considered an important contribution to educational research. Siegel's false distinction between conduct and product is a slip into the distinction between knowers and knowledge, between subjects and objects, that Peirce, and other pragmatists, worked so hard to reconnect and heal.

One last point regarding Siegel's argument against inclusion on epistemic grounds. Siegel softens his exclusionary approach by encouraging those who are
excluded on expertise grounds to protest on the grounds that "she is in fact qualified and sufficiently expert to be entitled to participate," or seek out and acquire the necessary expertise, or seek to expand the conversation topic so that she can be included. Siegel's respondent, Kathryn Morgan warns us about the perils of inclusion. One peril she titles "Theories R Us," points to how Siegel continues to presuppose that his theories are the norm, the ones doing the including, as he graciously includes others in his discourse and as objects of his theories (my theories are the best like my toys are the best, and my theories apply to everyone, like theories R Us) (p. 32-33). She warns that Siegel's proposal places women and minorities in an "experimental data" category of pseudo-inclusion while he continues to occupy an epistemological and institutional place of pride. Women and minorities must either conform to the given criteria and attempt to meet it, or show that they have already met it, thus giving up on their "differences," or change the conversation so that they can be included. In all of their options, they must comply, rather than take an oppositional stance. Their particularized epistemic subjectivity is eliminated with his recommendation (p. 33).

The roots of American Pragmatism developed at the same time that science was gaining in status in the Euro-western world, and the value and status of scientific thinking is assumed by Peirce, James, and Dewey in their work. It continues to be assumed today by scholars such as Siegel (and McCarthy). Still, we find in James's radical pluralism a criticism of philosophy and science (theoretical or scientific knowledge) as being just knowledge about things, which only touches the outer surface of reality. James reminds us, we add to pure experience, by differentiating and distinguishing, but we always start with "sensible realities" that come to life "in the tissue of experience." Knowledge "is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time" (p. 29). Or, put another way: "The instant field of the present is always experience in its 'pure' state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple that, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classified as objective fact or
as someone's opinion about fact” (p. 36-37). Thus, James offers support for feminist arguments that science itself is embedded in values that cause scientists to describe the world in certain ways and not others. Given Dewey's agreement with James's radical pluralism and his central claim that all inquiry (and logic itself) is affected by philosophical assumptions which are culturally bound, Dewey also offers support for feminists. 18

Dewey's greatest support for the argument I want to make here, that fallibilism entails pluralism in terms of including excluded others in the inquiry process, comes from his unique contribution to pragmatism, his transactional view of selves-in-relation-to-others.19 If we are relational social beings who are fallible and limited by our own embeddedness and embodiment, at a micro level as well as a macro level, then none of us can claim privileged agency. None of us has a God's eye view of Truth. Our only hope for overcoming our own individual limitations, as well as our social/political limitations (cultural and institutional) is by working together with others not like us who can help us recognize our own limitations. Through our use of language, as "the tool of tools", and our efforts to attempt to communicate and relate with each other, including others from our past and others we can only imagine in our future, we can enlarge our thinking and improve our inquiring. We can reach beyond our micro and macro limitations and continually revise and improve our theories, with the help of each other. Our embeddedness and embodiment (our fallibilism) constitute strong reasons for inclusion on epistemic grounds.

If we limit the others we are willing to attempt to relate to and communicate with to "scholars" or "experts," then we limit the reach of our understandings. For, the standards we use to determine expertise are also fallible and embedded within social contexts. Our standards of epistemic worth are not independent of the particular inquirers seeking to establish the standards, yet our standards can become more independent and more general the more we include other inquirers in the establishing of
standards. Our standards need to be continually questioned and this can only happen at a deep level, reexamining foundational background assumptions, if we allow in outsiders' perspectives. Given our fallibilism, then we must embrace the value of inclusion on epistemic grounds in order to have any hopes of continually improving our understandings. Inclusion of others perspectives in our debates and discussions allows us the means for correcting our standards, and improving the warrants for our assertions.

If we embrace James’s radical pluralism instead of Peirce’s synechism and assume that the universe is unfinished and pluralistic, rather than evolving to one necessary conclusion, then we can only hope for temporary alliances and agreements, truths that satisfy our corrigible standards. This is quite all-right, for in the disagreements and disharmony come the stimulation of more awareness and growth, and the chances of improving our understanding of our own unquestioned background assumptions as well as expanding our selected interests. Inclusion of others perspectives in our conversations allows us the means for adjusting for our own limitations, correcting our standards and improving the warrants for our assertions, and recognizing the role of power and privilege in epistemological theories. With the help of Peirce's fallibilism, James's radical pluralism, and Dewey's transactional, democratic view of selves-in-relation-to-others, one can make the case that (e)pistemological fallibilism entails the need to embrace pluralism in the sense of including others, outsider views, in the inquiry process. I turn now to the educational implications of this argument.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

An argument for pluralism on epistemic grounds entails that we must embrace a pluralistic commitment to the value of open membership in our classroom communities, so that there are no insiders and outsiders, and all have the possibility of belonging and
contributing to the inquirying process. A pluralistic commitment means we embrace and value differences among our students (and teachers). If we want to insure that our students are all afforded the chance to contribute to inquiry, then we must also embrace a democratic commitment to equal opportunities for our students. These pluralistic and democratic commitments do not mean that everyone must contribute in the same manner, there are an infinite variety of ways to contribute, as many as we can imagine, intuit, emote, and reason as possibilities. It does mean that everyone’s contribution is equally valued. Valuing each of our contributions does not mean that all of our ideas are used, and become equally valid consequences of our inquirying (naive relativism). But it does mean all students have the opportunity to contribute their ideas and have them fairly considered as possibilities (qualified relativism). Students need to be cared for and have their ideas considered in a receptive, generous manner. In order to protect its minority, dissenting voices, this pluralistic, democratic community needs to be committed to enlarged thinking. Enlarged thinking requires us to be willing to try to understand others’ points of view, and we can only do this by having the others’ tell us their views in their own voices. Thus our classroom community must aim for insurance of understanding each other, and insist on the careful consideration of all voices, even though we will not necessarily agree with each other. Our classroom needs to be a pluralistic democratic community always-in-the-making, as Maxine Greene describes it, a coalition across differences.

If we want our classroom community to be a pluralistic democratic community always-in-the-making, we need to be sensitive to the classroom environment and the power relations embedded within it. Being sensitive to power relations as we try to build coalitions across differences will help us avoid many potential problems and dangers, as well as teach us how to grow with our experiences and continue to expand our awareness and understanding. It does no good to embrace a commitment to pluralism
and democracy and then have a classroom community that undermines the very values it claims to embrace.

What are some of the potential problems and dangers of communities that we must continually be on the look-out for? One is the power of community culture over our own individual perspectives. How do we avoid indoctrination and social determinism? If we are constituted and shaped by our communities how do we avoid repression and the limitations communities impose on individuals? How do we insure that our classroom community does not become an institution that co-opts and integrates others voices into one image? Such tensions exist in current pluralistic, democratic communities, it seems without exception. We will never rid ourselves of all tensions, nor do I think that is an aim we would want to embrace. A community without changes and differences is a community that does not experience the possibilities of continual growth. We do not want to assimilate differences in our classroom community. Thus we want a radical democracy.23 If we insist our classroom communities continually reexamine and reevaluate our social, linguistic, and discursive practices, and consider how our communities help their members actively participate, then we can hope to have pluralistic, radical democratic communities always-in-the-making.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that epistemic agency can only be assured through interaction with others, and that assurance is tenuous, open to further revision. As world travelers24 of a radical democratic community always-in-the-making, we must negotiate with each other in order to come to an agreement of what is, and then pass our efforts on to the next generation for them to debate and discuss further. Individuals can/do make individual contributions to knowledge, but they do not do so as isolated individuals, they are community members. I embrace a fallibilistic view of truths, as I believe most scientists and philosophers currently embrace, although we certainly argue
about what Peirce’s fallibilism logically entails. With qualified relativism, I am not necessarily suggesting a linear, progressive model that postulates universal Truth at the end of time. I place the range of fallibilism in Jamesian terms, in an open universe. Like James, I do not postulate a world of Forms, or material Reality, that is separate from us and our efforts. And, like Dewey, to further avoid a charge of vulgar relativism I place emphasis on the social negotiating process that inquiry must go through, to help us settle our doubts and satisfactorily end our inquiry.

ENDNOTES:
2. author, (in review). "Pragmatism as Qualified Relativism."
12. Harvey Siegel, "What Price Inclusion?" in *Rationality Redeemed?*
13. These points are made by Bordo, Keller, Harding, Longino, Nelson, and many other feminist scholars.
15. I use here Siegel’s shortened wording from his outline used during his presentation and distributed to the attending audience.

