

# **From action to transaction: some implications of pragmatism and its concept of agency for development research and practice**

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### Abstract

Development suggests the notion of «good change» and its research and practice are about bringing it to fruition. Perhaps, because of this emphasis on application, relatively less attention has been given to philosophical issues, although shedding more light on the latter can contribute to the former. Positivism and, to a lesser extent, constructivism, with their advantages and disadvantages, have dominated the field. Against this conventional dichotomy, this article argues in favour of philosophical classic pragmatism as an alternative and does so employing philosophical ontology. From this perspective, pragmatism adheres to mind-world monism and phenomenism. As such, it demands healthy awareness and criticism of preferences and biases, whether personal or contextual, in the self and in the subjects of interest. It entails a call for plurality, to harness practical reason to solve practical problems, turning indeterminate situations into determinate ones, thereby generating warranted assertions.

**Keywords:** pragmatism, agency, philosophical ontology, development.

### Resumen

El desarrollo sugiere la noción de «buen cambio» y su estudio y práctica se concentran en materializarlo. Quizá, debido a este énfasis en la aplicación, los aspectos filosóficos han recibido menor atención relativamente, a pesar de que iluminar estos puede contribuir a aquella. El positivismo y, en menor medida, el constructivismo, con sus ventajas y desventajas, han dominado el área. Contra esta dicotomía convencional, en este artículo se argumenta en favor del pragmatismo filosófico clásico como una alternativa y lo hace empleando la ontología filosófica. Desde esta perspectiva, el pragmatismo se suscribe al monismo mente-mundo y al fenomenismo. Así, demanda una sana consciencia y crítica de las preferencias y sesgos, sean personales o contextuales, en uno mismo o en los sujetos de interés. Implica también un llamamiento a la pluralidad, para emplear la razón práctica en la resolución de problemas prácticos, volviendo situaciones indeterminadas en determinadas, lo que genera afirmaciones justificadas.

**Palabras clave:** pragmatismo, agencia, ontología filosófica, desarrollo.

# 1 Introduction

The study of development is about applied or instrumental research (Mehta *et al.* 2006). Academics and practitioners, to different extents, have recognized this is the case to the extent that some, like Molteberg and Bergstrøm (2000, p. 7), have acknowledged that «knowledge generation is not an end in itself». Instead, the end is to contribute to generate what is regarded as «good change» in reality. Indeed, at its most basic, this is how «development» is defined (Chambers 2004). What ever that is taken to mean, this aspiration highlights a tacit but virtually ubiquitous driving force behind the field, namely, a rather robust notion of agency.

This nature of «development», *i.e.*, accounting for and eliciting expected change, can be easily attested in the increasing interest in demonstrable «impact» that is demanded of both research and practice (Currie-Adler 2016). Funding and support for such efforts are at stake. Most importantly, people are at stake<sup>1</sup> (Alkire 2010). In this sense, their very agency has increasingly been also increasingly recognized as intrinsically valuable (Alkire 2009). This highlights the ethical dimension inherent in nature of development work.

Hence, questions of evaluation (normativity), belief (epistemology) and practice (action) are raised in discussing this field. However, relatively little deliberate attention has been given to the philosophical grounding supporting the practice-oriented character of development. The relevance of providing such basis for the conduct of inquiry and even the exercise of practice is twofold as it has intrinsic, as well as instrumental value. Shedding light on the philosophical ideas undergirding research and practice is valuable in and of itself. Additionally, given the influence this can have on the selection of theory and methods, such elucidation can contribute to carrying out empirical research more soundly.

The field of «development», reflecting social science more broadly, has been traditionally dominated by positivism and, to a lesser extent, critical studies (Currie-Adler 2016), which can be associated with some forms of constructivism. The great contributions of each philosophy of science notwithstanding, both appear to have limitations, and the strict adherence to either of them, often induced by epistemic and professional communities alike, may work against what is arguably the spirit of development, perhaps best captured in its scholarly discipline of development studies: «to improve people's lives» (Sumner 2006, p. 645).

Perhaps more importantly, despite their dominance, positivism, and constructivism, do not provide a comprehensive panorama of the philosophical landscape available for the social sciences (Chernoff 2007, Moses & Knutsen 2012, Jackson 2011).

1 Alkire (2010, p. 191) states: «The policies, practices, analyses, and measures that guide development institutions can be scrutinized to uncover which truly aim at human freedoms, and how true their aim might be [...]. By such inspection, the oversights of development theories might be uncovered and corrected. Such work is terribly salient, for lives are at stake. In development, Sen observes, "a misconceived theory can kill"».

Against this backdrop, it seems warranted to look for alternatives that better suit the nature of development research and practice, and this essay advances philosophical classic pragmatism as a promising one. This suggestion is certainly not new. Most recently, Garcés (in press), in this very forum, contributes in elaborating how public policy analysis can benefit from pragmatic insights. Epistemology takes centre stage in that discussion, which highlights the distinctness of pragmatism, *vis-à-vis* positivism, and its support of plurality.

This essay seeks to take the dialogue further widening the scope of comparison to other traditions, however briefly, and point to some promising implications of pragmatic development work. Against convention, which privileges scientific ontology, to make the case for pragmatism, an analysis from philosophical ontology is proposed. Whereas the former addresses «what is» or «what exists», leading to the ontology-epistemology-methods structure (well-known in the field of development, see Sumner & Tribe 2008a), the latter is concerned with the «hook up» that we have with the world. As such, philosophical ontology is logically prior to scientific ontology. Given that development studies provides fertile grounds for cross-disciplinary dialogue (Currie-Adler 2016, Sumner & Tribe 2008a), for this undertaking Jackson's (2011) seminal work in international relations is employed, as it provides a useful heuristic with which to analyse its philosophical wagers and its implications for inquiry.

Furthermore, given the practice-oriented nature of this discipline, which as mentioned above entails a notion of agency, whether in respect of the researcher/practitioner or the subjects of research/intervention, it seems pertinent to approach such discussion in terms of the notion of human agency.

Consequently, this article is divided into four sections, besides the introduction. The first presents the heuristic proposed for an adequate analysis from the philosophy of science, namely a philosophically ontological perspective. Pragmatism's characterization according to this framework and the pragmatic (trans)agent are elaborated in the second. The third section addresses some implications that pragmatic development work has for research and practice. The final section concludes.

## 2 Philosophical ontology

Scholarly and practical work in development has been dominated by positivism and, to a lesser extent, constructivism. The search for causality and the pursuit of explication and prediction have proven pervasive since the second half of the twentieth century

(Currie-Adler 2016). A critical movement accompanied these efforts in last decades from a constructivist philosophy of science, particularly the poststructuralist project (Sumner & Tribe 2008b). These reflect what is conventional construed as the antipodes in the spectrum of the philosophy of science (Della Porta & Keating 2008). Certainly, each tradition—in its own right—has provided great insights to the field of development. Much policy has been informed and interests behind it have been exposed from each camp, respectively.

At the same time, both have been subject to criticism. While positivism's quest for general laws (or anything close to it) has been strongly challenged (Sumner & Tribe 2008b), the usefulness of post-structuralism's critique to any and all knowledge claims as an exercise of domination has been questioned (Currie-Adler 2016). Nonetheless, these continue to be the main traditions undergirding development research and practice, each pursuing their own agenda and sticking to what they regard as their methods, techniques and strategies.

As this discussion suggests, addressing the philosophy of science can be useful in a twofold manner. Its intrinsic value lies in highlighting the assumptions and purposes in development efforts. Its instrumental value consists in the guide it provides for empirical inquiry. However, elaborating the argument in terms of that spectrum, as the literature has done thus far, seems rather restrictive, as it excludes important recent contributions (*e.g.*, most tellingly research with mix and multi methods designs).

In this sense, the argument elaborated here focuses on the philosophy of science but addresses what is arguably the most basic and abstract level of inquiry, namely, philosophical ontology, and sketches some implications for empirical exercises.

The difference with the conventional approach, better regarded as scientific ontology, is rather significant (Bhaskar 1975). *Scientific* ontology refers to the traditional study of «being» or «what exists in the world»; that is, it alludes to an archive or inventory of objects, processes or factors that a specific research expects to exist or of which it has evidence for its existence (Jackson 2011).

Instead, it is argued here a more useful point of departure is to take one step back and start from a *philosophical* ontology. This refers to the connection we have with the world or «to the conceptual and philosophical basis on which claims about the world are formulated in the first place: ontology as our “hook-up” to the world, so to speak, concerned with how we as researchers are able to produce knowledge in the first place» (Jackson 2011, p. 28). Beginning with the philosophy of science therefore is not only methodologically sound, as it guides research practices (Gorsky 2013), but also analytically advisable.

In this light, this approach challenges the traditional ontology-epistemology-methodology (understood as «methods») structure. This is not only an organizing sequence but a normative suggestion. As Jackson (2011) suggests, it implies the primacy of ontology (questions about *being* and what exists) over epistemology (questions about *knowing* and how can we formulate/evaluate statements about the world). As such, it also entails the primacy of philosophy of science over methods (the techniques used in order to gain knowledge about the object of study). Research strategies, therefore, depend on the world, meaning that «it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us» (Bhaskar 1998, p. 25).

Although reasonable at first sight, the ontology-first position has the fundamental problem of assuming «what exists», what is the world made of. This is problematic, because challenges about ontological claims become implausible, such as the epistemological question on the validity of the claim or the method-related question as to which technique to use in order to assess the claim (Chernoff 2009). In this sense, scientific ontology is logically (and necessarily), subsequent to philosophical ontology since sensible claims about what exists can only be made after having established the grounds on which they stand (Patomäki & Wight 2000). As can be gathered from the above, the ontology-first tradition refers to *scientific* ontology. Hence, this project seeks to avoid the pitfalls of convention placing *philosophical* ontology first.

## 2.1. A heuristic device: the knower-known and observation-knowledge relationships

In this context, a practical categorization of philosophical ontology principles seems useful. However, the philosophy of science jury is still out on the issue of the most important, fundamental or useful positions concerning philosophical ontologies. There is no all-encompassing classification either, but neither is it needed. As Jackson (2011) suggests, what is necessary is a functional criterion; that is, to establish categories that allow: *i*) identifying the disagreements between different perspectives and positions in the philosophy of science, and *ii*) comparing them so as to elucidate the consequences of adopting any. A heuristic device on this basis would enable the study of different approaches on clear and similar criteria, which seems necessary in order to justify the selection of any.

Perhaps, the most developed work in this regard has been elaborated by Jackson (2011) which, as he suspects, extends to social science broadly. Thus, the present discussion relies on his seminal contribution.<sup>2</sup> He identifies two philosophically ontological wagers: *i*) the relationship between the researcher and the world to be researched, or the relationship between the mind and the world, and *ii*) the nature of knowable entities or the relationship between ob-

2 In employing this approach, this project is cautious to subscribe to Humphreys' (2013) contribution, by regarding Jackson's contribution as a heuristic rather than a typology.

ervation and knowledge. Each is a spectrum the extremes of which depict ideal typical states.

First, the relationship between the mind and the world (also referred as the mind and the body) entails, on the one hand, *mind-world dualism* and, on the other, *mind-world monism*. Mind-world dualism is the stance supporting that there is a world «out there», independent of the knower, that can be known as it is. Since objectivity lies in that world, objective knowledge is possible. The task of research is, therefore, to bridge the gap between the mind and the world. Philosophically, ever since the introduction of this separation by Descartes, this has been the task of epistemology (Taylor 1995). Mind-world monism, contrastingly, sees no separation between the researcher and the researched world. Accordingly, the knower is part of the world. Knowledge, then, is not about elaborating accurate descriptions of an already-existing world. It is nonsensical to talk about «the world» as separated from the activities of making sense of it.

The relationship between knowledge and observation, in turn, offers two positions: *phenomenalism* and *transfactualism*. Phenomenalism describes the stance that knowledge claims are purely related to human experience. This ought not to be confused with empiricism, which posits that only the «naked» senses (solely sensual perception) matter. Instead, phenomenalism adopts an enlarged notion of experience in order to include «mediated observation» as well, *i.e.*, the use of different types of artefacts in order to enhance sensory perception. As such, it can be considered an extension of empiricism. Transfactualism, in turn, holds that knowledge can go beyond experienced facts (and hence its denomination) to apprehend processes and factors that generate those facts (Wight 2006). In other words, this position entails the possibility of transcending experience and thereby of knowing in-principle unobservable things (Bhaskar 1975).

The conjunction of these commitments provides four philosophies of science, approaches to inquiry (Jackson 2011) (see Table 1). At the conjunction of mind-world dualism and phenomenalism can be found the most widely used approach, namely *neopositivism*. The framework that combines mind-world dualism with transfactualism is *critical realism*. *Analyticism* is at the crossroads of mind-

Relationship between the knower and the known			
		Mind-world dualism	Mind-world monism
Relationship between knowledge and observation	Phenomenalism	Neopositivism	Analyticism
	Transfactualism	Critical realism	Reflexivity

**Table 1**

Jackson's (2011) matrix of philosophical ontological wagers and the methodologies resulting from their combination

world monism and phenomenism. Finally, mind-world monism and transfactualism underpin *reflexivity*. This typology is ideal-typical (in the Weberian sense),<sup>3</sup> and therefore, it does not depict a reality, but rather exposes, in a simplified manner, relevant commitments that are elusive, implicit or unclear nowadays.

As it is argued below, pragmatism is best placed within analyticist wagers. Therefore, for current purposes and due to space limitations, only this approach is briefly introduced to provide a description of its main features.<sup>4</sup> The argument elaborating how pragmatism fits within it is developed in the next section.

## 2.2. Analyticism

The combination of mind-world monism and phenomenism produces analyticism. Mind-world monism posits that the mind is interwoven with the world in a constitutive manner, that the knower is part of the known, and vice versa. In other words, the researcher is constitutive of the world. Therefore, the activities carried out to research the latter are themselves the world, as they are producing it. Contra dualists, for monists, the «world» does not refer to a stockpile of things but to an array of facts. The objects with which scientific inquiry is concerned are not meaningless entities susceptible to our senses but are always and already intertwined with intentional (our interests) and conceptual (our theories and creativity) content.

Phenomenism, in turn, posits that knowledge claims are limited to what can be experienced, either directly or indirectly. At the same time this does not mean, that analyticists cannot use propositions about in-principle undetectables such as powers and properties, as long as they are used *instrumentally* to explain observed phenomena; *i.e.*, as long as they are used to explain manifest action and without any ontological commitments about their reality.

## 3 Pragmatism as Analyticist

Pragmatism has been defined in different ways. It has been regarded as a theory of meaning and a theory of knowledge (Quinton 2010) and also as a general theory of inquiry (Pihlström 2022); it has been considered a «living philosophy» (Talisso & Aikin 2011), and has been described as an account of «how we think» (Menand 1997). The literature points to at least two types of pragmatism: classic and neopragmatism.<sup>5</sup> The differences can be quite relevant for this discussion (see, *e.g.*, Pihlström 2013, Hildebrand 2003, Kloppenberg 1999, Menand 1997); therefore, in this paper, pragmatism refers to *classic* pragmatism.<sup>6</sup>

3 «Instead of a representation or a depiction, it is a deliberate over-simplification of a complex empirical actuality for the purpose of highlighting certain themes or aspects that are never as clear in the actual world as they are in the ideal-typical depiction of it» (Weber in Jackson 2011, p. 37).

4 For a discussion on how the development debate, and human agency within it, can be approached from this philosophical ontology perspective and its implications for the conduct of inquiry see Garcés-Velástegui (2023a).

5 For a slightly different but also relevant distinction, see Misak (2007).

6 For the purposes of this paper, the argument mainly focuses on the works of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead since, although building on the insights of those before them, they developed the pragmatist understanding of agency most directly (see Carle 2005).

At its most basic level, it departs from «acting», not from «things» (the world) or from «reason» (the mind), thereby preventing false starts (Kratochwil 2011). It is a consequentialist perspective, for which knowledge production is relevant «[p]rimarily, persistingly and essentially for the sake of action» (Quinton 2010, p. 3). Influenced by Charles Darwin, pragmatism's approach to action focused on accounting for change not absolutes (Dewey 1931). The implications were twofold: the account of social change and, more importantly, the role of science and philosophy in generating change.

Regarding social change, it is the product of action and action is the relationship between human beings and their environment. Beyond action, this relationship is considered a *transaction*, which is regarded as a primitive fact or a fundamental phenomenon that needs no causal explanation (Testa 2017). This proposal rejected the conventional notions of self-action and inter-action since the former, dominant in sociology, entailed that things act by their own powers and the latter, influential in economics, suggests that things are balanced against each other as in causal relations (Smith 2004). In both, the common denominator is that the units composing them come to the foreground. Transaction challenges the idea that elements composing a system can somehow be separated from it, as if there were discontinuities in the world. Instead, it recognizes the continuity existing between humans and their context. In other words, transaction highlights that this relationship is one indivisible unit. Moreover, this relationship is described as organism-environment so as not to suggest any metaphysical primacy of either. Hence, pragmatism suggests a relational ontology.<sup>7</sup>

For the generation of knowledge, transaction means there is no separation between the mind and the world. The result is a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth and incorporating meaning into knowledge claims (Sidorsky 1977). Accordingly, pragmatism moves away from the positivist aspiration of «lifting the veil» of reality, identifying fact, regarded as objective truths, thereby getting to know the world as it is. Dewey (1931, p. 11) stated:

Because we are afraid of speculative ideas, we do, and do over and over again, an immense amount of dead, specialized work in the region of «facts». We forget that such facts are only data; that is, are only fragmentary, uncompleted meanings, and unless they are rounded out into complete ideas—a work which can only be done by hypothesis, by a free imagination of intellectual possibilities—they are as helpless as are all maimed things and as repellent as are needlessly thwarted ones.

Apropos of the role of science and philosophy in change, it is related to the pragmatic approach to knowledge. Dewey referred to it as *instrumental*, concerned with the resolution of social problems. That is, research practices can and should generate change. «Dewey sought to demonstrate that an instrumental concept of truth explained how knowledge could effect social change while other

7 As such, interesting commonalities have been found between pragmatism and critical realism (see, e.g., Pratten 2022, Elder-Vass & Zotzmann 2022).

theories of truth held by rationalists or empiricists could only make this a miracle or mystery» (Sidorsky 1977, p. xliv). Beyond the sciences, this project pertained philosophy as well. Therefore, Dewey (1931, p. 8) asserted: «But philosophy is not just a passive reflex of civilization that persists through changes, and that changes while persisting. It is itself a change; the patterns formed in this junction of the new and the old are prophecies rather than records; they are policies, attempts to forestall subsequent developments».

In other words, by accounting for action, social change can be scrutinized. Moreover, since that scrutiny itself is action, it is also producing change. This is particularly evident when that scrutiny seeks to induce change, as development work and practice do.

To fix ideas, the notions of *doubt*, *belief*, *habit* and *inquiry* become relevant when discussing action. Peirce (1878) defined doubt as a state of uneasiness and dissatisfaction generated by a situation in which there is uncertainty about how to proceed, how to act. Action has been somehow hindered, and this causes unsureness and hesitation. Dewey (1938) referred to such a situation as indeterminate. It is so because it is not clear which course of action is adequate, convenient or pertinent and, hence, action has stopped.

Belief, for Peirce (1878), describes the opposite state, one in which action is constant and uninterrupted. This is a state of calm and satisfaction that dissolves doubt since it is one on which action can be confidently furthered. Such a state is the product of knowledge, of knowing what to do.

Habit, in turn, is made of acts and indicates an aggregation of acts structuring experience. In this sense, contrary to common wisdom, a habit does not solely denote repeated acts. It refers to «an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts» (Dewey in Hildebrand 2008, p. 25; emphasis in the original); that is, habits are tendencies or dispositions and as such are subject to change.

Both, doubt and belief, promote action but in different ways. Whereas belief guides desires and action, under certain circumstances, doubt prompts action to overcome doubt itself; this action is the struggle to attain belief and can be considered *inquiry* (Peirce 1878).

Consequently, the attainment of belief, and ultimately habits of action, is the sole function of inquiry (Peirce 1878). Once this is achieved, and action can be furthered anew, the situation becomes determinate (Dewey 1938). When this point is reached, according to Dewey, no claim of truth is made, as that would establish an absolute. Not even label of knowledge is adopted (Bacon 2012). Instead, assertions depicting this outcome are deemed «warranted». Warrantedly, assertible propositions are in this sense, and following

Dewey's (1931) project for philosophy, at the same time modest and bold.

Therefore, pragmatism regards inquiry as transaction, a process by which humans engage with their environment, through manipulation, whenever action has been hindered, to remove the obstacle, until they are able to further action again.

### **3.1. Pragmatic agency: the transaction of self and society**

Describing and elaborating on the pragmatic notion of agency is rather challenging, because the pragmatists did not advance a fully developed theory of the self (Wiley 2008). Plausibly, the most elaborated account is provided by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead.<sup>8</sup> Drawing from Darwin, Dewey proposed a theory of the self that was organic, in which the human being is not separated between mind and body, but is characterized as one, a body-mind organism (Dewey 1958) that is not static but emergent, inasmuch as it is constructed by virtue of the circumstances or conditions surrounding it, which means that there is an element of contingency in it. In fact, rejecting Cartesian dualism and the separation of the mind (human consciousness) from the world (nature), he preferred the notions of «organism» and «environment», so as to stress that neither is conceptually prior to the other, since they give continued meaning to each other. Further, environment signifies the totality of connotations it has, *inter alia*, social, cultural, emotional, intellectual, physical, ecological, which are only analytically differentiated but exist within a single situation. There is, therefore, a continuity between the human being and nature.

This continuity applies to the social realm as well. Relational ontologies, such as pragmatism's offer a fundamental alternative to conventional approaches based on separation (Trowsell 2021). As such, pragmatism's social ontology is useful to account for social entities, which have proven challenging to understand. While they seem to possess an (inter)subjective character, they have properties that can be known (Testa 2017).

Consequently, neither the self nor society have metaphysical primacy. Against individualism, individuals have no existence prior to or separate from society and its traditions and institutions. Similarly, contra structuralists and post-structuralists, although society influences individuals, it does not determine the selves, which incidentally do exist, in body and in personality.

### **3.2. Habits, selves and action**

In order to account for the dynamics between self and social context the pragmatic notion of habit can be useful. Dewey (1930, p. 125) states that «[m]an is a creature of habit, not of reason nor

8 As it happens, Dewey's take on these issues developed throughout his work. Therefore, in this paper, his middle and late contributions are utilized. Complementing and building upon it, the work of George Herbert Mead is also revised since it is not only pragmatic, but Dewey explicitly endorsed it (Wiley 2008).

yet of instinct». Against the reflex-arc wisdom, habit is more than conditioned response. Habits entail ways of realizing desires via intelligent action. Dewey privileges habits (as predispositions formed by several acts) for they are more intimate, informative and fundamental about human beings than conscious choices.<sup>9</sup> Habits, from the most mundane to the most skillful activities, are what makes much of experience intelligible. He states that

[a]ll habits are demands for certain kinds of activities; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they *are* will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity (Dewey 1930, p. 25; emphasis in original).

In making sense of experience, habits contribute to preference formation and capacity development, which creates individuals' demands, as well as somewhat stable possibilities of responding to those stimuli; that is, what one desires and feels capable of is the product of habits. The exercise of freedom, for instance, hinges upon this since «freedom depends on skill and skill on habit» (Hollis 2010, p. 39).

Habits change mainly due to the frustration of habit or conflict among habits. In both cases, when habits are not expressed, they give way to ideas or incite impulses, which work to change the environment or choose from competing habits. This situation calls for an internal deliberation in order to further action anew.

### 3.3. Pragmatic agency: the «self» in «action»

A more detailed account of the (aforementioned) internal deliberation, and the development of the self, is offered by George Herbert Mead. He subscribed to Dewey's notion of habit<sup>10</sup> and complemented it (Baldwin 1988). In true pragmatic fashion, the point of departure is action or the act. For Mead, acts are always social. Individual and social facts cannot be reduced to one another since they are constructed simultaneously. «For Mead, functional interrelations among individuals, not a priori social facts, are primary» (Johnson & Shifflett 1981, p. 146).

What is more, human group life is social interaction. Group life is people's acting itself. This can be analytically described as an interactive process, composed of *i*) indication, *ii*) interpretation, *iii*) formulation of response, and *iv*) action. Indication refers to the meaningful (verbal and non-verbal) gestures individuals transmit to one another (Blumer 2004). Interpretation is the attribution of meaning given to those gestures. Formulation of response denotes the activity of devising a specific course of action. This is particularly evident when there is a discrepancy between the meaning conveyed in indication and the meaning generated in interpretation.

9 Dewey (1930, p. 176) asserts «habits formed in process of exercising biological aptitudes are the sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight and judgment: a mind or consciousness or soul in general which performs these operations is a myth». And he continues: «Concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done. "Consciousness", whether as a stream or as special sensations and images, expresses functions of habits, phenomena of their formation, operation, their interruption and reorganization» (Dewey 1930, p. 177).

10 «Reflective thinking arises [...] for carrying out some hypothetical way of continuing an action which has been checked. Lying back of curiosity there is always some activity, some action, that is for the time being checked [...]. The solution of the problem will be some way of acting that enables one to carry on the activity which has been checked in relation to the new act which has arisen» (Mead in Kilpinen 2012, p. 59).

Action is the product of interpretation and the overt response to indication, which becomes indication itself.

This insight has implications for action as well as meaning. Regarding action, it is seen as self-directed, not evoked by stimuli. Meaning, in turn, is not a psychic product added to a gesture or a gesture's given characteristic but is conceived of as the future action entailed by the gesture. Consequently, pragmatic agency has an inherent and explicit interpretive element, and it is evidenced in action.

### 3.4. Objects, meaning and action

Purposive human action, for Mead, is oriented toward «objects», understood as anything that the individual notices, refers to or designates (Blumer 2004). Hence, objects can be material and/or immaterial, from within and/or without the individual's body, real and/or imaginary, etc. Put simply, if the individual is aware of it, it is an object for that individual. This awareness is not generated in a vacuum but in social interaction. Others around us draw our attention to different elements in our environment, making them objects to us as well. Likewise, it is through the indication generated by their acting towards those objects that we learn how to act towards them, by «role-taking», thereby providing them with meaning. Therefore, the meaning of objects is constructed socially. Hence, all objects are social products.

Further, the meanings of objects constitute the nature of the object for the individual. The motives, interests, objectives, attachments, commitments, and designs of action may entail are factored in those meanings. As such, objects constitute the world or environment within which human beings operate (Mead 1972). Consequently, an object presupposes a subject and human action is to be studied in terms of the objects that make up an individual or a group's world and towards which they act.

Importantly, since objects are everything of which an individual is aware, the self can be an object as well. At its most basic, the self is the object that the individual is to themselves.<sup>11</sup> Self-interaction is based on social interaction, because the latter enables performing role-taking. It is by assuming the position of others that individuals can treat themselves as objects. The multiplicity of interactions (and thereby of others) permits the production of a «generalized other», that goes beyond specific social roles and adopts a more abstract character. Regarding the self as an object, thus, enables importing the communicative process (by which relationships among humans are characterized) to the internal sphere.

By the same token, by enabling internal interaction (indicating something to oneself, interpreting it, formulating action, and acting), the self can also be regarded as a process. This is a fluid one

11 This resonates with Taylor (1985, pp. 15-16), who states: «But what is distinctively human is the power to evaluate our desires, regard some as desirable and others as undesirable. This is why "no animal other than man" [...] appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires».

in which the human organism is acting (denoted as the «I»), and whose action is being reflected upon (denoted as the «Me»). While the «I» can be understood as the disposition of the organism to act, the expression of an impulse, the «Me», can be considered the view of the generalized other (Mead 1972). «The "I" is the source of spontaneity and innovative actions. The "Me" is the vehicle of self-regulation and social control» (Baldwin 1988, p. 117).

### **3.5. Between unreflective and reflective acts**

For pragmatism, therefore, human action occurs in two basic forms: as habitual and as creative acts (Joas 1996). Habit is the most basic resource of action that allows this continuous process. At different moments, the latter can be challenged, and then conscious, reflective or creative action is resorted to in order to further the process. Indeed, behavioral insights, one of the most influential accounts of decision-making, support this account in a pragmatic manner (Garcés-Velástegui 2022b). In this sense, all action requires thought, but different actions demand different levels of reflection. Moreover, reflective action needs habitual action as a basis to build upon or as a background. As Dewey stated, «thought which does not exist within ordinary habits lacks means of execution» (1930, p. 67).

Further, habits could be regarded as objects. Habits are constitutive of a person's self and as such they are a part of a person's world. While people might not be aware of some habits, the latter are recognizable, acquiring thereby meaning and inducing action. Indeed, in principle, habits are open to the person's reflection, even while they are being performed (Kilpinen 2012). The corollary, hence, is that by looking at the habits and the objects (some habits included) that make up a person's world an account of pragmatic agency can be provided.

### **3.6. The pragmatic transagent**

For pragmatism, therefore, human beings are intelligent, reflective, diversely motivated organisms of habit that can be studied in terms of their objects; that is, they are transagents. They are intelligent, because they are forward-looking in their examination of the objects of their experience; that is, their scrutiny of the relations, connections and causes of their ideas and values is carried out with the future consequences of them in sight. By so doing, ultimately, the aim is to control the inevitable change in the world. They are reflective because they are capable of see themselves as objects of scrutiny. In that examination they can question their motivations, which can be other than self-regarding ones. They are organisms, because their relationship with their context is such that they constitute one unit with their environments. In this unit, they

are constantly and mutually changing each other. They are creatures of habit because, being predispositions for action, they are akin to deeply internalized beliefs on which all action, whether conscious or not, is based. As such, they are more intimate and informative than choices. Finally, their transagency can be studied in terms of their objects because the latter constitute the world them. They solely act upon that which is an object for them. If it is not an object, it does not exist for them.

## 4 Pragmatism, social science and development

Philosophical pragmatism is essentially a consequentialist and action-oriented philosophy. Perhaps because of this, it has been commonly associated with a relativist focus on «whatever works». However, as the discussion thus far has sought to show, pragmatism entails profound and complex implications for the conduct of inquiry in development studies and its practice in development policy and programs.

As an analyticist methodology, pragmatism rejects mind-world (or mind-body) dualism and instead adheres to monism. This is a recognition that the knower is constitutive of the known, and the latter can only be known as it is perceived by the former. In this transaction, the knower is also constituted by the known since, at its most basic, it becomes an object for the knower and thus the knower cannot be the same as before that occurrence. Similarly, pragmatism subscribes to phenomenalism, which entails a commitment to experience. However, this is not the same as empiricism's exclusive reliance on sensory experience. Without an ontological commitment to the existence of non-sensory perceivable entities, pragmatism can incorporate them functionally in the understanding and explanation of a phenomenon:<sup>12</sup>

Dewey's move is not to embrace either realism or idealism but to undercut them by describing a vision of knowledge and reality that most adequately expresses experience as it is lived. This approach preserves some intuitions found in both realism and idealism, but it also rejects many of their central premises (Hildebrand 2003, p. 86).

Why does this matter? To paraphrase Sheppard (in Hardy 2016, p. 773), writing apropos of another practice-oriented discipline: «Interesting as they may be, [philosophy of science] issues lack relevance or utility [...] unless they have practical utility, thus pushing [...] researchers to generate knowledge which is practically useful within "the practice paradigm"». This is precisely the spirit of pragmatism: to engage with practical concerns and put philosophy at the service of furthering human action.

12 This phrasing is purposeful. It is meant to include the Weberian division between *erklären* («explaining») and *verstehen* («understanding») in social science, associated with positivism and reflexivity, respectively. Additionally, the «and» instead of «or» is also deliberate in order to highlight the analyticist position that challenges such dichotomy.

Development work is characterized by being application-oriented; that is, it seeks to get an effect on the world, and this entails a robust notion of agency. There is a growing accord that these efforts ought to be directed towards the betterment of people's lives (Sumner & Tribe 2008b), which entails recognizing and enhancing their agencies (Alkire 2009). This is even more so whenever the increasingly influential capability approach is employed<sup>13</sup> (Sen 1999). Therefore, providing an adequate account of human beings and their agency can hardly be overstated. In this sense, the implications for the research and practice of development are meaningful.

#### 4.1. Pragmatism and development practice

For the practice of development, one implication is that, when formulating, implementing or evaluating programs and policies, it is important to factor in people's agency. Pragmatism recognizes that human beings, in different degrees and to different extents, enjoy agency. Therefore, contra paternalistic perspectives, to acknowledge it is to acknowledge their humanity. Hence, this is not only normatively adequate but empirically sound.

In the field, when dealing with subjects, the import of pragmatism can prove useful as well. Practitioners are likely to face challenging situations that hinder action, defy conventional knowledge or, in pragmatic terms, question belief. These situations create doubt and induce the search for potential solutions or inquiry. When doing so, pragmatism's advice is twofold. First, it may be helpful to regard subjects as deeply intertwined with their contexts, current and previous, social, cultural, geographical, etc. As argued above, this means understanding their behaviour in terms of the objects and habits that constitute their world and themselves.

Second, from a pragmatic perspective, practitioners are agents themselves. This means that they are constituted by objects and habits that make everything and anything intelligible to them. Often, because of some of them, they expect (and are expected) to be able to provide objective solutions and demonstrate impact in the real world (Currie-Adler 2016). However, as this paper has sought to argue, agents act according to purposes and this means that their action, has an inherent interpretive or subjective element in it, because it entails meaning (Alkire 2009). For pragmatism, this is not problematic to the extent practitioners show critical awareness that they are agents as well and that they approach the world, and the subject with whom they work, with their prejudices. Therefore, pragmatically speaking, anxieties regarding the lack of objectivity may be put to rest.

#### 4.2. Pragmatism and development research

For development research, as the case of practitioners, the implication is bipartite. On the one hand, subjects ought to be regard-

13 Indeed, there is a growing body of work analyzing the scope of the approach's notion of agency and enhancing it, from empirically informed philosophical additions (see, e.g., Wolff & De-Shalit 2013) to ones from sociology (see, e.g., Hvinden & Halvorsen 2017), to ones from economics (see, e.g., Garcés 2020a; Garcés-Velástegui 2022c, 2023b).

ed as a complex tapestry, consisting of both personal characteristics, as well as those of their context. This means that in order to understand a subject it is necessary to understand both their physical features as well as their history, environments, surroundings, etc. This may not seem an insight since, at first glance, it appears consistent with one of the most dominant approaches in the field, namely, Sen's capability approach (see Sen 1999, Garcés 2020b, Garcés-Velástegui 2022a).

However, the latter still is heavily focused on choice, *i.e.*, it seems to regard people as choosers. This is perhaps understandable given the approach's lineage in economics, the latter's roots in positivism (Caldwell 1994, Garcés 2019), and its preference for what is observable. Pragmatism, in turn, goes further. It regards habits and objects as more intimate and, therefore, more informative than choice. By so doing, it provides a richer account of human experience.

Consequently, in practical terms, for pragmatism, incorporating a subject's agency into the analysis means scrutinizing the objects and habits that make up their world and themselves. Certainly, this applies to practitioners themselves as well.

On the other hand, researchers are agents themselves, constituting the world with their research practices and being constituted by it. As such, they do not approach the world from a non-prejudiced position; that is, claims to objective knowledge, absolute truth and certainty, *i.e.*, the positivist agenda, are not possible. Quite the contrary, they study subjects by dint of, and in fact thanks to, their intentions, preferences and desires, and the results of their research necessarily so reflect. Consequently, pragmatic development research entails a commitment with transparency regarding these influences and due acknowledgement of them in their work. As in the case of practitioners, this liberates researchers from claims of objectivity since approaching a mind-independent, *i.e.*, objective, world is nonsensical. All knowledge claims, therefore, are cautiously preliminary, not because they are underdetermined by the evidence, but because no amount of evidence could ever suffice to reach objectivity, since it is necessarily interpreted by the researcher.

### **4.3. Explaining, understanding, and cross-fertilization**

Pragmatism has the potential to contribute to the rigorousness with which development inquiry and interventions are conducted, satisfying thereby the interest in both in explaining as well as understanding. This is so because pragmatism «has developed a *general theory of inquiry* not restricted to the natural sciences or the humanities, or to any other specific field of inquiry, for that matter; nor does it presuppose a principles dichotomy or dualism between the natural and the human sciences» (Pihlström 2022, p. 25, em-

phasis in the original). The incorporation of relevant habits and objects of both the researcher/practitioner and the subjects of research/intervention can enrich development work improving its explanatory and predictive power, an increasing interest of stakeholders, particularly of those funding such initiatives (Currie-Adler 2016). Certainly, such efforts are better suited for smaller scale projects, since taking into consideration additional information from all participants involved (*e.g.*, reasons, motivations, meanings...) and their contexts is resource demanding. Expectations of causality, therefore, may have to be adjusted from general to conjunctural. Interestingly, there has been a recognition in development work that such approach may prove more rewarding and a tendency in that direction has emerged in recent years (Sumner & Tribe 2008b).

Pragmatism can also accommodate the interests of those concerned with meaning, interpretation and critical inquiry. Since development work is transaction, the relevant meanings (in terms of action) of those involved in the process ought to be accounted for. This is inherent to any pragmatic endeavour. Moreover, the recognition that the world is constituted by development activities (whether research or practice), which is what development is all about, demands the explicit and adequate treatment of the effects of development scholars/professionals and their work on subjects as well as the effects of the latter on the former. Furthermore, since much of these activities are also directed (in some cases exclusively) to wider audiences, *i.e.*, policy makers, funding agencies, academic communities, pragmatism also entails cognizance of how those undertakings are constituting the wider world. This is a call for reflexivity.

How to carry out such research and practice empirically? Pragmatism does not endorse the exclusive use of any given method or technique and in fact it challenges such propositions. Pragmatic development research and practice entails a call for *i)* fallibility, to move beyond the quest for truth, ridding ourselves from the Cartesian anxiety (Bernstein 1983), and to acknowledge that warranted assertions or solutions (knowledge claims) are necessarily conjunctural, and *ii)* plurality, to harness the insights from different disciplines and fields in creative, purposive and constructive dialogue in order to generate viable solutions, to the best of our knowledge and ability.

The purposes of inquiry dictate the strategy to be used. In some cases, this may mean a reliance on methods and techniques associated mostly to positivist research; in others, it may entail using strategies mostly used in constructivist inquiry; in others still, it may demand a combination of both via mix- or multi-methods designs. «[...] conceptions, theories and systems of thought [...] are tools. As in the case of all tools, their value resides not in themselves but in their capacity to work shown in the consequences of their use» (Dewey 1985, p. 163). In other words, for pragmatism,

«form follows function» (Garcés in press). What is needed is, at the very least, a recognition that research methods and techniques are not the patrimony of a philosophy of science, *i.e.*, «methods» do not equal «methodology», the explicit and critical awareness of the preferences and biases of those involved, and because of the latter, that warranted assertions settle issues only temporarily.

This cross-disciplinary character has been and continues to be one of the main advantages of the field of development (Currie-Adler 2016). As such, pragmatism can contribute to make development a space for mutual learning and cross-fertilization. Not only the field can gain from this but each of its contributing disciplines. As Harriss (2002, p. 494) suggested: «“Discipline” in research is productive [...]. But equally it is extremely important that academic disciplines, or the particular “sets of rules” that predominate within any one of them [...] are subject to critical scrutiny from other approaches [...]. [T]here is a sense in which “disciplines” need to be saved from themselves».

#### **4.4. Values and ethics**

Much like warranted assertions, normativity and values become beliefs that enable action. As such, they are ubiquitous to human experience (Putnam 2002). Despite positivist efforts to pursue certainty and objectivity, believing it is separable from normativity (see Garcés 2016, Garcés-Velástegui 2022a, Caldwell 1994), not even science can escape the fact-value unity. While value is not equated with ethics, science has values, «epistemic» ones (Putnam 2002):

These pragmatist philosophers did not refer only to the kind of normative judgments that we call «moral» or «ethical»; judgments of «coherence», «simplicity», «plausibility», «reasonableness», and of what Dirac famously called the beauty of a hypothesis, are all normative judgments in Charles Peirce’s sense, judgments of «what ought to be» in the case of reasoning (Putnam 2002, p. 31).

Such epistemic notions do not have distinct factual and evaluative parts (Putnam 2002). They are inherently normative, framed within a specific context of evaluation (Bacon 2012). Accordingly, they have been subject to change over time. An example is the confirmation-verification-falsification movement in positivism (see Caldwell 1994).

That norms and values have a provisional character applies to social norms and ethics, just as it applies to scientific ones. Indeed, indeterminate situations can ensue because values and norms lose validity. In such events inquiry is necessary to adjust them, as well as to facilitate action again.

Therefore, although development suggests the idea of positive change, pragmatic development work does not prescribe what that

«positive» may be. That is not the normativity question that it seeks to address. Pragmatism is wary of absolutes (Menand 1997) and, therefore, neither does it offer an answer, nor does it believe that only one can be provided. Instead, what is «good change» is necessarily conjunctural. How is the decision to be made and by whom? As the discussion thus far has sought to highlight, pragmatism stresses action as necessarily social. Transagency entails that human beings generate the meanings of the objects and habits of which they are constituted by transacting with each other. Therefore, what is regarded as an indeterminate situation, *i.e.*, a hindrance to action, is decided as part of the dynamic process that is that transaction. The same applies to ways in which that hindrance is solved or the attempts to turn that situation into a determinate one. Further, what is considered as a determinate situation itself and, thus, what warranted assertions are, is also subject to that transaction. Hence, this transaction is inquiry, and inquiry is transaction. Put simply, what is to be changed, what is «good change» and how to get from the former to the latter, is a matter left to the public sphere.

Pragmatism is committed to democracy (Dewey 2001, Menand 1997). The public, all stakeholders, exercising their transagency, transact and should transact, in order to bring about the desired change, or not, and in the manner that they deem desirable, if so. Since in this process people become constitutive of each other and, therefore, we affect one another, pragmatism calls not only for explicit awareness of our biases but of critical cognizance of them. Challenging our own motivations, interests, values, customs, and traditions is as important, if not more, as questioning those of others. Consequently, pragmatic development research and practice can assuage, to a certainty extent, concerns regarding the ethical grounds on which development work stands.

## 5 Conclusions

Development not only entails «change» but «good change» (Chambers 2004) and, as Beland and Cox (in Currie-Adler 2016, p. 9) state, «what things change and how they change are all the result of what people choose to do [...]. [T]hese choices are shaped by the ideas people hold and debate». Given its applied or instrumental nature, development work raises questions regarding normativity, belief and action. This article has argued that the field of development could provide some answers by incorporating the insights of philosophical classic pragmatism.

Pragmatism is a living philosophy that offers an account of how we think and act. In fact, according to the discussion above, it is per-

haps better described as offering an account of how we act since, for pragmatism, thinking is just another form of action. Placing action at the locus of attention, pragmatism adheres to a consequentialist, naturalistic and pluralist framework that privileges practical concerns, avoiding thereby the pitfalls of rationalism and empiricism. Because of this, it has been deemed pertinent to study human action or agency from the philosophy of science in order to flesh out the implications of pragmatism has for development research and practice.

Instead of the conventional *scientific* ontology-first approach, this article has argued in favour of taking one step further back and departing from a *philosophical* ontology, which focuses on the grasp we have on the world. For that undertaking Jackson's (2011) proposal has proven useful. It entails placing philosophical wagers along two continua: *i*) the relationship between the knower and the known, which establishes mind-world monism and dualism, and *ii*) the nature of knowable entities or the relationship between observation and knowledge, which produces transfactualism and phenomenalism. The result is four quadrants showing all possible combinations as ideal typical methodologies. Employing this heuristic, pragmatism has been shown to coincide with analyticism, the methodology subscribing to mind-world monism and phenomenalism.

Therefore, from a pragmatic point of view, human agency is perhaps best understood as *transagency*. This is because this philosophy regards the organism and the environment as one unit engaged in transaction, a simultaneous complex process of mutual exchange in which both become constitutive of each other. Therefore, neither the unidirectional concept of action and agency nor the bidirectional «taking turns» notion of interaction or what could be called «interagency» seem to apply. Humans further their action by dint of habits, which are acquired predispositions to act that structure experience. In this sense, habits represent beliefs, or internalized notions on which we are prepared to act. Whenever there is a hindrance to action, we face an indeterminate situation, causing doubt as to how to proceed. This prompts inquiry, the process of trying out different hypotheses until action can be furthered anew, creating thereby a determinate situation. In this process, we engage with that which exists for us, namely objects. Habits and objects are constitutive of humans. This recognition enables a wide range of possibilities for pragmatic inquiry and work, depending on the exercise. Highlighting these features makes pragmatism more tractable, elucidating thereby why «Dewey's pragmatism cannot be assimilated to either traditional realism or idealism» (Hildebrand 2003, p. 75). More specifically, that human beings are transagents means that they are intelligent, reflective, diversely motivated organisms of habit that can be studied in terms of their objects.

More specifically, that human beings are transagents means that they are intelligent, reflective, diversely motivated organisms

of habit that can be studied in terms of their objects. Their intelligence is demonstrated in their capacity to infer the future consequences of their ideas, values, and actions against the objects of their experience, as an attempt to control the inevitable and constant change within the world. That is, they are forward-looking. Their reflexivity is shown in their capability to regard themselves as objects and, thus, entities that can be subjected to scrutiny and be acted upon. As such, their own values, preferences, reasons, and motivations (whether other or self-regarding) can be critically examined. They are organisms in the sense that they are one and the same with their environment, suggesting no metaphysical primacy of any above the other. In this sense, organism and environment are one indivisible unit in which both are constantly changing and constituting each other. They are creatures of habit because these are predispositions for action. As such, they internalize belief, which undergirds all action, conscious or not. Hence, habits are more informative and intimate than choices. Humans, thus, are *habiters* rather than choosers. Lastly, because their worlds are made of all that which is an object for them, and those objects are defined in terms of action, their transagency can be studied in terms of those objects.

As above, the implications for development research and practice have also been sketched out. Pragmatism's focus on action, consequences and practical matters already resonates deeply with the spirit of development. Pragmatic development practice regards humans as agents, with different levels of agency. Moreover, their agency can be understood by the habits and objects making up their worlds. For development practitioners, therefore, pragmatism means also regarding themselves as agents, *i.e.*, full of preferences and biases, constantly exchanging with their context in order to further action. Pragmatic development research calls for a recognition of subjects as well as researchers as agents. In the case of the latter, this means admitting that they approach research full of interests, intentions, creativity, theories, various methodological preferences and even meaningful personal and contextual features. All of these determine the prejudiced position that influences their work and consequently ought to be duly and critically acknowledged therein.

For practitioners and academics alike, in the field of development specifically but also in the social sciences more broadly, pragmatism demands healthy awareness and criticism of preferences and biases, whether personal or contextual, in the self and in the subjects of interest. This opens up the door to plurality, to harness practical reason to solve practical problems, turning indeterminate situations into determinate ones, generating warranted assertions thereby, which are not be all and end all panaceas (as these are unattainable) but are solutions that enable us to move forward by settling issues for the time being, until that settlement is dislodged,

requiring inquiry to start anew. As such, pragmatism can contribute to Woolcock's (2007, p. 57) aspiration for the field of development, namely, a community of «practical thinkers» and «reflective doers».

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