Epistemology and Social Work – Professional Knowledge of and for Social work

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The Issues

- Welfare and well-being (*eudemonia*) should be the focus of social work practice. Professional systems ought to be facilitative of this.

- We are however increasingly 'dedicated' to perceiving the smaller picture rather than the larger one. This is one manifestation of neo-liberal individualism.

- We can use systemic principles to understand what policy and practice-related systems are doing, but also to appreciate what they are not doing.

- Rules of and for action ought to be revised based on the lessons from experience and the results of reasoning – rationality is 'bounded'.

- This leads us to consider the relevance of *pragmatism* as a mechanism for increasing our knowledge and how we might apply it

- How do social work professionals construct and use particular forms of (professional) knowledge?
- Using philosophical pragmatism as a ‘filter’, knowledge construction and utilisation *per se* can be made more intelligible.
- More specifically, I argue that pragmatism itself can be seen to be an integral component of *all epistemic activity* and should therefore be seen as a primary mediator in the processes of (professional) knowledge construction, use and development.

- ‘The task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everyone sees’

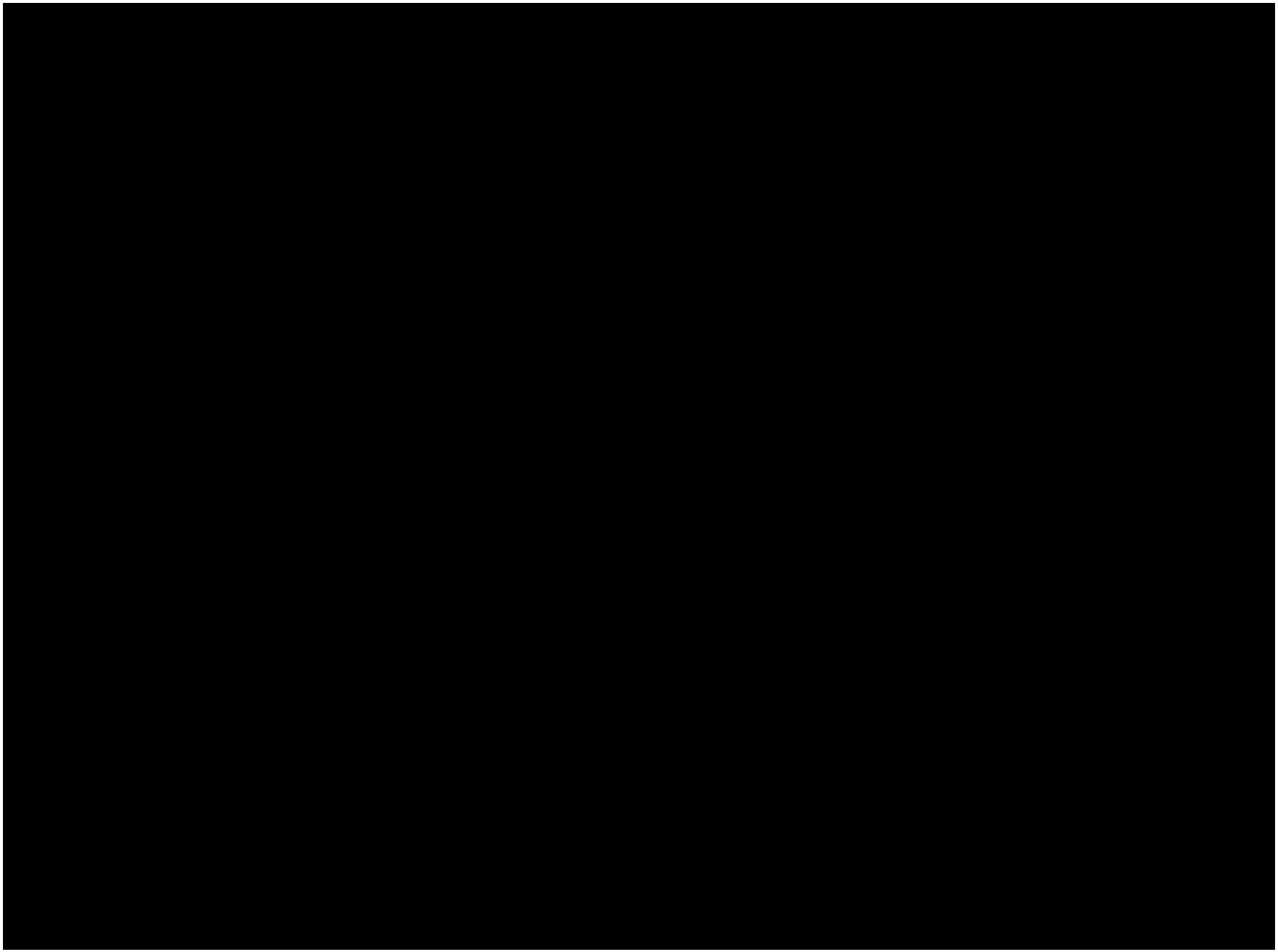
- Arthur Schopenhauer: *The World As Will And Representation* (1818/1969)

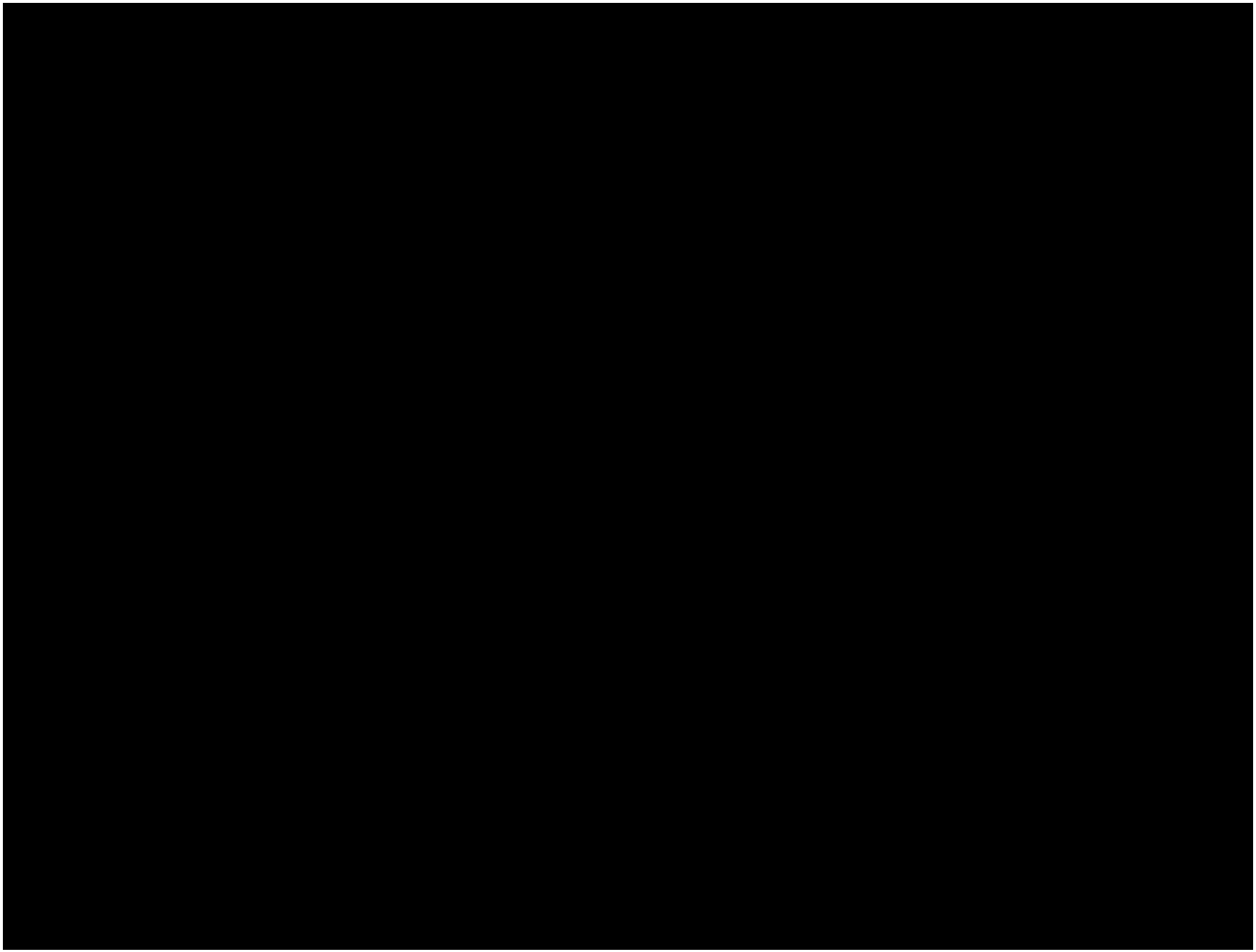
Pragmatism as an organizing conceptual framework

- Pragmatism has as its concern the implications of purposive action
- Pragmatism as a means of studying the acquisition of knowledge and its use (action)
- Everyday life as 'something in the making'
- Pragmatism is concerned with the emergent, processual & interconstituted relationship between *knowing* and *doing* which occurs as people engage with, and in, the world around them
- Human knowing as intimately connected to human doing (c/f: Vygotsky)

Pierce's Pragmatic Principle

- A person will be justified in accepting proposition *X* as being true if…
- …at the time, there is nothing to confirm or disconfirm the acceptance of *X* as such and…
- …there is a real possibility that by accepting *X* as true (or very likely to be so), it is likely to enhance 'cognitive or moral' utility more than if *X* was not accepted.
- Pragmatic Principle = heuristic device





Evidence-based…?

- Evidence-based approaches as currently formulated in the UK and other European countries are fundamentally and inherently flawed.
- All ‘evidence’ is provisional and subject to the effects of *uncertainty*, the influence of the observer and system effects.
- These influences can lead us either to *collapse* or *creativity*.

Quantum Principles

- Heisenberg: 'Uncertainty Principle' and 'Observer Effects'
  - The more accurately we predict one element of a system, the less accurately we can predict other elements

$$\sigma_O = \sqrt{\langle \hat{O}^2 \rangle - \langle \hat{O} \rangle^2},$$

  - Being part of the system affects how it functions and our capacity to accurately describe it.

The quantum nature of social life

- The *uncertainty* of human action/reaction should encourage us to apply quantum principles to social life.
- Systemic influences are often invisible and their effects uncertain.
- Rather than search for ‘evidence’, pragmatism allows us to work towards generating ‘inference to the best explanation’.

- Pragmatism can facilitate our understanding of the possible [emergent] policy/practice outcomes based on the acceptance of Pierce's Pragmatic Maxim: *by approaching it this way, it appears more likely that it will work – as we go along, we will change it if we need to*. Ideologies have a role.

- *Inductive approach to knowledge creation regarding policy/practice and outcome measurement.*

- Pragmatism argues that theory and practice are not separate and distinct entities – rather, that theory is but an abstraction from direct experience/practice and ultimately must return to inform this [C/F – Hume].

Pragmatism as an organizing conceptual framework

- Dewey: ‘Logical forms accrue to subject matter when the latter is subjected to controlled inquiry’.
- The findings of inquiry remain indeterminate in that they are open to reinterpretation on the basis of further inquiry, *ad nauseum.*
- The determination of a genuine problem is *progressive*
- The observation of ‘facts' (perceptions) and their suggested meanings (conceptions) arise and develop in correspondence with each other.
- Perception >>>>✪<<<<Conception
- ‘Perceptual & conceptual materials are instituted in functional correlativity with each other’ (p326)
- ✪ = function
- Pragmatism = functionality (technician?): must include ‘why?’

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