

Undercutting the Realism-Irrealism Debate: John Dewey and the Neo-Pragmatists

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in pragmatism, especially that of John Dewey, William James, and Charles S. Peirce. Pragmatism has been embraced as a distinctively American via media, capable of bridging the contemporary divide between philosophy-as-cultural-criticism and philosophy-as-fundamental science. Indeed, the avowal by certain prominent philosophers of pragmatic commitments has been so widespread as to earn them the title of "neo-pragmatists." On one central issue, however, the interpretations by these philosophers of classical pragmatists has served to place them in opposing camps. This is the issue of whether the views on truth and reality by these "classical" pragmatists determine them to be realists or irrealists, and whether these views could legitimately serve as foundations for contemporary "neo-pragmatism." For example, two prominent neo-pragmatists, Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, have taken quite opposite stands on this issue. Rorty derives from classical pragmatism a decidedly irrealistic position while Putnam's is markedly realistic.

Insight into Putnam and Rorty's differences as neo-pragmatists can be seen by looking at how radically different their positions are on the question of epistemological warrant; i.e., whether "facts" or criteria that are non-linguistic exist to evaluate epistemological claims. In an effort to locate where precisely he and Rorty disagree, Putnam lists five principles concerning warranted belief and assertion, the first two of which he feels sure Rorty will reject:

- (1) In ordinary circumstances, there is usually a fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not;
- (2) Whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one's cultural peers would say it is warranted or unwarranted.
- (3) Our norms and standards of warranted assertibility are historical products; they evolve in time.
- (4) Our norms and standards always reflect our interests and values. Our picture of intellectual flourishing is part of, and only makes sense as part of, our picture of human flourishing in general.

(5) Our norms and standards of anything-- including warranted assertibility-- are capable of reform. There are better and worse norms and standards.

Putnam comments that

Although there is a tension-- some will say, an unbearable tension-- between these principles, I do not think I am the first to believe that they can and should be held jointly. From Peirce's earliest writings, they have, I believe, been held by pragmatists, even if this particular formulation is new. (Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, 22)

Rorty finds an "unbearable tension" here, and disputes the first two principles listed by Putnam, questioning whether warrant requires "a fact of the matter" and indeed that notion's very coherence. At stake is, as Rorty puts it, "a bedrock metaphilosophical issue: can one ever appeal to nonlinguistic knowledge in philosophical argument?" (Consequences of Pragmatism, xxxvi) Rorty's answer to that, qua pragmatist, is no. Comparing the pragmatist with the intuitive realist, Rorty writes,

The intuitive realist thinks that there is such a thing as Philosophical truth because he thinks that, deep down beneath all the texts, there is something which is not just one more text but that to which various texts are trying to be 'adequate.' The pragmatist does not think that there is anything like that. He does not even think that there is any thing isolable as 'the purposes which we construct vocabularies and cultures to fulfill' against which to test vocabularies and cultures. But he does think that in the process of playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other, we produce new and better ways of talking and acting-- not better by reference to a previously known standard, but in the sense that they come to seem clearly better than their predecessors. (Consequences of Pragmatism, xxxvii)

In his essay "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism" Rorty goes on to characterize pragmatism as

. . . the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones-- no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only

those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. (Consequences of Pragmatism, 165)

Putnam cannot accept this kind of pragmatism. He writes,

Must we then fall back into the [Rortian] view that 'there is only the text'? That there is only 'immanent truth' (truth according to the 'text')? Or, as the same idea is put by many analytic philosophers, that 'is true' is only an expression we use to 'raise the level of language'? [T]he problem with such a view is obvious...if all there is to say about the 'text' is that it consists in the production of noises (and subvocalizations) according to a certain causal pattern;...if there is no substantive property of either warrant or truth connected with assertion-- then there is no way in which the noises that we utter or the inscriptions we write down...are more than expressions of our subjectivity. (Realism with a Human Face, 113)

It is my view that neither of these neo-pragmatist approaches are legitimate derivations from the work of Dewey, James or Peirce. As I see it, the effect of the proposals regarding truth and reality taken by the pragmatists was to undercut the entire realism/irrealism controversy. In this dissertation I propose to show that Putnam and Rorty, as well as other neo-pragmatists, misuse the metaphysical platforms of the classical pragmatists to their own ends, all the while sustaining--under the label "pragmatism"-- dualisms which the classical pragmatists fought to dissolve. I will also argue that the attempts of some neo-pragmatists to eliminate metaphysics (as an irrelevant enterprise) are based on similar misunderstandings of the nature and role of pragmatic metaphysics. Because John Dewey was the pragmatist who most thoroughly addressed the potential for philosophy to perform a dual service (providing cultural critiques and metaphysical accounts), my dissertation will focus on his works primarily. James and Peirce will be referred to as needed. The larger importance of my doing this lies in the fact, as I will conclude by arguing, that the positions of Dewey, James, and Peirce are more original and, indeed, more defensible than the neo-pragmatist positions (realist or irrealist) derived from them.

I propose to approach these issues in the following way.

In the first chapter I will attempt to summarize the essentials of the current realism/irrealism controversy and, more specifically, the manner in which neo-pragmatists such as Putnam and Rorty understand it. The second chapter will distill out what I take to be the pivotal issues underlying the controversy in order to set up a critical comparison with the views of the classical pragmatists, especially Dewey.

These two chapters are introductory and will comprise Part One of the dissertation. The next two chapters will be devoted to the close analysis of recent interpretations of Dewey as a realist or irrealist, in that order. The third chapter will examine interpretations of central notions Dewey's metaphysical theories, especially Dewey's concept of "nature". The fourth chapter will examine interpretations of central notions in Dewey's epistemological theories, notably his instrumentalism.

The conclusion to be drawn from these chapters is that certain recent neo-pragmatist interpretations of classical pragmatism are seriously flawed, and leave open to question the suitability of the moniker "pragmatist" for the positions that prominent neo-pragmatists seek to advance.

Part Three will consist of two concluding chapters whose aim to critically compare the neo-pragmatists and the classical pragmatists. Chapter Five will argue that Dewey, taken as representative of the central metaphysical and epistemological tenets of classical pragmatism, provides a distinctive position regarding truth and reality which is more promising than those imputed to classical pragmatism by Putnam or Rorty. Chapter Six will conclude by showing how this reappraisal of classical pragmatism undercuts many of the issues driving the contemporary realism-irrealism debates among neo-pragmatists.

The proposed outline of the dissertation, then, is as follows:

Part One:

Chapter One: The Neo-Pragmatists and the Contemporary
Realism/Irrealism Dichotomy

Chapter Two: Clarifying of the Issues

Part Two:

Chapter Three: Dewey Considered as Realist
Chapter Four: Dewey Considered as Irrealist

Part Three:

Chapter Five: Dewey on Truth and Reality
Chapter Six: Conclusion: Undercutting the
Realism/Irrealism Dichotomy

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