

Summary

Neopragmatism

One can provide a number of strong reasons that recent philosophy, namely that of the closing decade of the twentieth century and of the beginning of the new millennium, is characteristically *fin de siècle* philosophy. It is difficult to find within it completely new trends and fresh ideas. It consists, for the most part, in various attempts to elaborate upon, transform, and criticize conceptions invented and outlined much earlier in the twentieth century. Among them there is neopragmatism, or new pragmatism, which was initiated three decades ago by Richard Rorty, and independently by Hilary Putnam. This revival of pragmatism has been strengthened by the work of other thinkers, including Robert B. Brandom, whose unique blend of analytic, pragmatic, and idealist ideas is widely discussed these days.

Neopragmatism as a philosophical movement may be described and expounded in at least three different ways. Firstly, it can be presented against the background of classical pragmatism and compared with the formative original ideas put forward by Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. This approach is usually taken by historians of philosophy and various philosophers going under the banner of “American philosophy” who often insist that neopragmatists have misunderstood and misapplied original pragmatist ideas, by combining them with unhelpful analytical methodology, and so forth. Secondly, one can take neopragmatism as an attempt to overcome essentially modern analytic philosophy, and to make a fresh contribution to the postmodern culture. In this account, the central stage is assigned to Rorty and his philosophy (or rather, to one of its many threads). Thirdly, one can also take the opposite view and give an account of the main ideas of neopragmatism in light of analytic philosophy and its historical development, in order to show their differences and similarities, the sources of mutual inspirations and disagreements, etc. This book unambiguously belongs to the third approach, but without any claim to exemplify the only right way of describing the development of neopragmatism and its place in recent philosophy. The matters with which intellectual history deals are too complicated for such claims to exclusivity to be plausible.

The first chapter provides a general overview of classical pragmatism and its crucial ideas concerning meaning, truth, and knowledge. After its

rapid and unexpected demise, pragmatism was revived in the last decades of the twentieth century and combined with recent philosophical movements, including continental philosophy (Rorty, Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas) and the analytic tradition (Putnam, Brandom). In order to take account of the diversity of this revival, some attempts are made to distinguish neopragmatism from new pragmatism; however, this distinction is unconvincing, and one can safely use these two terms interchangeably. Of course, while describing new pragmatism in greater detail, one can variously group its proponents by taking into account similarities and differences in their views. For instance, some of them – following or discussing Rorty – turn for inspiration to continental philosophy which pays more attention to human practice and is not obsessed by traditional epistemological or ontological problems (Richard J. Bernstein, Joseph Margolis). But there are also neopragmatists that see no reason to overcome the analytic tradition (Michael Williams, Huw Price). They think that it is enough to cultivate and develop within it a distinctive methodological orientation which insists that one should investigate how our concepts function in human practices of inquiry and deliberation, what their role is, and not how they represent the world, what exactly are their semantic correlates, and so forth.

The next three chapters give a historical account of the relationships between pragmatism and analytic philosophy. The obvious beginning of such an account are criticisms of pragmatic ideas by the British founders of analytic philosophy, George E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. Moore provided an uncharitable, though very precise and meticulous, analysis and criticism of James's account of truth, and eventually found that account untenable and unbelievable. James decided to ignore that analysis and criticism, since, as he put it in his private correspondence, Moore was too childish, weak and silly to deserve any comment at all. It seems that the mutual aversion of those two thinkers prevented them from engaging in the real debate and advancing our understanding of truth. The debate between Russell and pragmatists, including James and Dewey, was more successful, whilst also showing marks of hostility. While discussing Jamesian ideas, Russell pointed out, among other things, that the application of a pragmatic criterion of truth is far more complicated than is usually assumed, and that if truth is defined in terms of this criterion, the ensuing notion will not have much in common with the ordinary concept of truth. He found in Deweyan instrumentalism a much better and cogent expression of pragmatism, though one still wanting in proper appreciation of the non-inferential elements in cognition, and neglecting knowledge acquired by sheer contemplation (as opposed to knowledge acquired by subjects acting in the world). Both James

and Dewey made some attempts to meet Russellian objections, but without much success.

This initially hostile relationship between pragmatism and the emerging analytic tradition was soon replaced, on both sides, by more moderate and favourable attitudes. It is sometimes claimed that the last great classical pragmatist was Clarence I. Lewis, known mostly for his work in modal logic. In his epistemology and metaphysics he was partly influenced by Charles S. Peirce, and defended the view known as “conceptual pragmatism”. Lewis insisted that in our knowledge of the world empirical data are shaped and interpreted by our concepts. Since there is no unique set of concepts used in our interpretative endeavours, we are forced to choose one set of concepts from several available options, and rely in this choice on various pragmatic factors, such as utility, convenience, simplicity, etc. Lewis was often, unlike James and Dewey, painstakingly analytic in his approach to philosophical problems, and there is every reason to consider him as the first analytic pragmatist.

Peirce’s ideas, although largely ignored by the founders of the analytic movement, were noticed by its early follower Frank P. Ramsey, the untimely deceased genius from Cambridge. He made significant use of Peircean ideas in his justification of induction. Ramsey argued that induction is justified since it is an indispensable tool in forming beliefs that are often true. He also suggested, in similar pragmatic vein, that the content of a belief may be accounted for in terms of its utility and practical consequences, and assumed that the same holds for the meaning of a sentence. One can also discern pragmatic components in the writings of Rudolf Carnap, the most creative and influential logical positivist. They can be found in his *Principle of Tolerance*, which states that there are no morals in logic, and everyone can propose her own logic, conceived as a form of language, provided it is simple, convenient and useful. A pragmatic thread is also present in his famous distinction between internal and external questions of existence, and his insistence that the latter are not factual, since to answer them one simply needs to choose and accept a linguistic framework within which factual internal questions may be posed.

Ludwig Wittgenstein and Willard V. Quine, the most widely discussed and influential philosophers of the analytic movement at its height in the middle of the twentieth century and ensuing decades, encountered pragmatic ideas and conceptions, yet they were reluctant to embrace them. Wittgenstein knew and discussed some of James’ works in philosophy of religion and psychology, but not his writings on pragmatism. In fact, Wittgenstein rarely mentioned pragmatism, and when he did, he insisted

that it gives a wrong account of the validity of argument, and of truth; he also expressed concern that his own epistemology sounds too much like a pragmatic manifesto. Certainly though, one may justifiably claim that his conception of philosophy as an activity of some sort, and his conception of meaning in terms of use, have strong affinities with pragmatism. Quine, as an American philosopher and some time a student of Clarence I. Lewis, was more exposed to the pragmatic tradition. He explicitly invoked it in the concluding paragraph of his famous paper on two dogmas of empiricism, and he emphasized that as far as the choice of linguistic frameworks is concerned, his pragmatism is more thoroughgoing than that of Carnap and Lewis. He later retracted this statement and declared that the meaning of the term "pragmatism" is hopelessly unclear. However, one can show that there are more Lewisian pragmatic influences in Quine's philosophy than he was prepared to admit.

This overview of the relationship between pragmatism and analytic philosophy is followed by three chapters about the neopragmatic views of Richard Rorty. In his early writings, he occasionally emphasized the unusual historical importance of analytic philosophy, particularly its linguistic variety, which seemed to him to put all traditional philosophy on the defensive. He later admitted that this was a gross overstatement, and that linguistic philosophy was really nothing but one more school, whose hot controversies now appear strange and antique. However, the careful reader of his early writings may also notice that even then he was, to some extent, skeptical about the lasting value of linguistic philosophy and its apparently incontrovertible arguments and results. There are simply no such results in philosophy, he claimed, since philosophy is an ongoing dialogue and a human conversation, with constantly changing criteria of relevance; it allows us to say what is acceptable to other members of our society, and not what is uniquely determined by the way things really are.

The case for the conversational nature of the philosophical enterprise was forcefully and influentially made by Rorty in his later publications, and presented as an outcome of reviving the pragmatic tradition and fusing a certain construal of it with the ideas and conceptions of continental thinkers, including Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger. For that reason, he was often taken as a renegade who switched from the analytic tradition to the continental movement. Yet Rorty himself insisted that he had never failed to learn and draw inspiration from recent analytic works. He also thought that the analytic–continental distinction, being the odd mixture of geographical and sociological criteria, is not of much use in describing current approaches to philosophy. He proposed to replace it with two

metaphilosophically oriented distinctions: between analytic and conversational philosophy, and between analytic and transformative philosophy. Conversational and transformative philosophers disagree with the scientism prevailing among analytic philosophers, and with their belief in the unique and constant set of philosophical problems. They emphasize that what constitutes a philosophical problem varies enormously from one historical period and tradition to another. The main aim of philosophy, therefore, is not to find solutions to a certain set of problems and to seek consensus, but to continue iconoclastic conversation and to propose wide-ranging narratives which have transformative effects on their readers.

This account of Rortyan metaphilosophy is followed by three chapters on Hilary Putnam, the second major neopragmatist. For some time Putnam was a characteristically analytic philosopher of science, of mind, and of language. But in the 1970s, he significantly changed his views by launching an attack on what he called metaphysical realism, and defending internal realism. Roughly, metaphysical realism is the belief that the world consists of the fixed totality of objects and properties; this belief is combined with the idea that such a world admits of a complete and unique description, and with the idea of the correspondence theory of truth. Even though internal realism does not deny that the world is, to a large extent, independent from us, it emphasizes that the way in which it is described depends on a conceptual framework selected for this purpose. Truth does not consist in correspondence with the world, but is some kind of rational acceptability in ideal or sufficiently good epistemic conditions. At the heart of internal realism is the doctrine of conceptual relativity, later taken by Putnam as a special form of a wider phenomenon called conceptual pluralism. For conceptual pluralists, the world may be described in various conceptual frameworks or language games, none of which are more privileged or fundamental than others. In some cases, one can show that the conceptual frameworks in question, while embodying different pictures of the world and being *prima facie* incompatible, are cognitively equivalent. If this is indeed so, the phenomenon of conceptual relativity occurs.

Putnam has forcefully argued that conceptual relativity and conceptual pluralism in general undermine the prospects of ontology as a viable philosophical discipline. He has even proclaimed in his recent book that ontology is dead and pronounced its "obituary". He has been pursuing this line of argument despite the considerable weakening of his internal realism and the rejection of the epistemic account of truth. This has eventually led him to the position called natural or common sense realism. However, irrespective of these changes and modifications, he has held that his realism has

a strong pragmatic character. In his most recent publication, Putnam has also begun to emphasize various shortcomings and limitations of the analytic tradition, connected especially with its scientism and naturalism. He has insisted that what we really need is a serious renewal and transformation of philosophy, drawing upon other philosophical traditions, including classical pragmatism. We should realize that although in some parts philosophy overlaps with science, it cannot be turned into a science. It is a humanistic enterprise having two dimensions, theoretical and moral, and it is unfortunate when we tend to forget about either of them.

The third very influential neopragmatist is Robert B. Brandom, whose selected views are discussed in the last three chapters of the book. Although Brandom is critical of some features of a narrowly conceived classical pragmatism, he simultaneously and explicitly embraces a version of pragmatism, both in his overall philosophical outlook, and in his philosophy of language. His distinctive theoretical approach is based on what he calls rationalist pragmatism, which is a version of fundamental pragmatism. Within his philosophy of language, it takes the form of semantic pragmatism.

Brandom considers his pragmatism as rationalist, since it assigns a central role to practices of giving and asking for reasons, which are taken as conferring conceptual content on our mental acts and linguistic performances. Such a rationalist pragmatism is a tenable version of fundamental pragmatism, that is of a general view assigning explanatory priority to knowing how over knowing that. One can also put it in terms of understanding, and say that, according to fundamental pragmatism, propositional explicit knowledge should be understood in terms of what one does, that is, in terms of a set of practical abilities. Semantic pragmatism is a much more specific doctrine. Briefly, it underlines the priority of pragmatics (i.e., a study of the ways linguistic expressions are used) over semantics (i.e., a study of the sense and reference of linguistic expressions). Although Brandom does not assume that meaning is just use, he claims that use has explanatory priority over meaning or content. That is to say, it is the use of expressions which determines what meanings, if any, they have. Furthermore, the use of expressions may be conceived in broadly functionalist terms: as the roles played by expressions in a wider linguistic practice or game.

He further elaborates these ideas in the related but partially independent project of analytic pragmatism. This project consists in taking a given vocabulary and trying to identify some set of practices and abilities sufficient to make a competent use of it. Of course, these practices and abilities need to be specified in another vocabulary, which is, for a given target vocabulary, its metavocabulary. In this way, one obtains an interesting

relationship between two vocabularies. The relationship is a semantic but pragmatically mediated one. It is especially pertinent to this project that, in many cases, pragmatic metavocabularies differ in their expressive powers from corresponding vocabularies to which they are related. Brandom calls this phenomenon “pragmatic expressive bootstrapping”, and notices that there are cases in which a metavocabulary is considerably weaker than its corresponding target vocabulary (this is the phenomenon of strict expressive bootstrapping).

Brandom sees his tight package of interrelated ideas as strongly influenced by three large philosophical traditions: classical pragmatism, idealism, and analytic philosophy. He is well aware that the latter has faced various objections: among them the charge of scientism. Brandom believes that scientism is fairly harmless when it takes a sociological form, and amounts to nothing more than the requirement that philosophical discourse should be modelled on the scientific one, and not on the literary one. However, it is more dangerous when it manifests itself in methodological monism, and assumes that scientific understanding is the only kind of genuine, valuable understanding. Brandom holds that methodological monism, although quite common in the analytic tradition, is not a constitutive part of it. One can safely remain analytic in one’s philosophical approach, without being constrained by dubious principles of methodological monism.

In general, neopragmatism has been met by the mainstream analytic philosophers with anxiety and reservation. It has been argued that it undermines and questions obvious differences, and gives us a picture of the world too dependent on our conceptual resources, inextricably interwoven with our various activities. It supposedly tends to present our thinking as not being about the world, but as simply happening in the world. For instance, Jerry A. Fodor emphatically declares that all these pragmatic tendencies have had disastrous consequences for analytic philosophy of language and mind. On the other hand, some advocates of the pragmatic turn are unhappy with the way it has been executed by Rorty, Putnam, or Brandom, finding it either too postmodern, or too analytic. Although some disagreements and debates within the neopragmatic family are marks of its diversity and liveliness, some are just too radical and deep to preserve the unity of this movement for any significant period of time. Perhaps though, neopragmatism is here to stay for some time, since its competitors in most parts of the world are well worn-out ideas from the past century, repeated *ad nauseam* with spurious technicality by analytic philosophers, and with deceiving pretentiousness by continental thinkers.