Questioning the Canon from Within: Pragmatism's Dialogues with Itself

Sarin Marchetti[*1], Maria Baghramian[*1], áine Mahon[*1], and Fergal Mchugh[*1]

[1]University College Dublin [Dublin] (UCD) – Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland

Abstract

Panel submission for the Second European Pragmatist Conference

September 9-11, 2015

University of Paris

PANEL TITLE:

Questioning the Canon From Within: Pragmatism's Dialogue With Itself

PANEL PARTICIPANTS:

Professor Maria Baghramian, University College Dublin

The Winding Road of Putnam's Pragmatism

Dr. Áine Mahon, University College Dublin

Rorty and Dewey on Fuzziness and Structure

Dr. Sarin Marchetti, University College Dublin

Pragmatic Anti-Representationalism: A Family Therapy

---

[*]Speaker

Dr. Fergal McHugh, University College Dublin

A Deep Tension Within Pragmatism: Putnam and Price on Truth and Justification

Questioning the Canon from Within: Pragmatism's Dialogue with Itself

GENERAL ABSTRACT

If pragmatism is best understood as a tradition of debate featuring what Richard Bernstein has called "a *plurality* of different narratives" (Bernstein 1995: 55) in perennial contrast with each other, then the most interesting scholarship lies in the investigation of the multiple and unceasing adjustments internal to the tradition. Such internal questioning of the canon, signals the ever-increasing vitality of the pragmatist tradition, which nowadays involves not only those authors working exclusively within pragmatism, but also a variety of other philosophical schools and methods. This labor of philosophical integration has revolutionized the very shape of pragmatism, as it shapes into an inclusive philosophical approach and outlook rather than a closed set of doctrines. The stakes of these dialogues are thus not merely historiographical, but also involve a re-discussion of the very theoretical principles and philosophical ambitions of the tradition. Familiar exchanges of the kind we have in mind include those between experienced-based and language-based conception of pragmatism, pragmatist theorists and pragmatist quietists, or more in general between epistemological-experimental-realists and sociological-conversational-relativists.

The proposed panel surveys some of these exchanges within pragmatism in order to assess the state of the current debate about what it means, *today*, to be a philosophical pragmatist. Our goal, in particular, is to reconsider the metaphilosophical stakes of these exchanges in order to sketch a composite picture of the contemporary pragmatist philosophical scene. The brand of pragmatism we shall focus on is that of analytic (or, better, post-analytic) pragmatism, thus examining the work of Putnam, Rorty, and of a cluster of authors who reacted to their provocative writings such as Robert Brandom and Huw Price. By investigating the internal dialogues between these authors as well as their own re-reading of the pragmatist philosophical canon (and, in some cases, the re-reading of their own work in the light of such debates), we aim at canvassing the latest adjustments within, and re-negotiations of, pragmatism. These dialogues cut across the distinction between classical and neo-pragmatism, as we find both deep continuities between e.g. Putnam and Dewey or Rorty and James, and stark differences between Putnam and Rorty or Brandom and Price.

In her paper Maria Baghramian reconstructs Putnam's engagement with both classical and recent pragmatism, presenting his intermitting faith in pragmatism as motivated by a critical attitude towards Rorty's antirealism and quietism. Áine Mahon outlines Rorty's engagement with Dewey's theory of education, showing how Rorty's internal criticism of Dewey's metaphysical and scientistic aspects best exemplifies the celebration of the attractive and the inspirational at the heart of his literary reconfiguration of pragmatism. Sarin Marchetti surveys the recent neopragmatist strategies for anti-representationalism of Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom and Huw Price in the context of their different readings of the pragmatist progress in twentieth century philosophy and of Wittgenstein's contribution to and place in it. Fergal McHugh highlights some core similarities and differences between the later Putnam's views of truth and the "genealogical" account provided by Huw Price as an attempt to make sense of the later Putnam's views on truth.

The Winding Road of Putnam's Pragmatism

MARIA BAGHRAMIAN, University College Dublin

Putnam's characterisation of his brand of pragmatism is scattered in his writings of the past thirty years and amounts to a nuanced and complex picture. Defined negatively, Putnam's pragmatism amounts to a rejection of what he famously has called 'metaphysical

realism'. In particular Putnam, like the pragmatists rejects the correspondence theory of truth, an ontology of facts and the intelligibility adopting a supposedly objectivist 'view from no-where'. Defined postively, Putnam's Pragmatism amount's to

(I) The rejections of various unhelpful and pernicious dualisms, including, most importantly, the subjective objective dualism and its close relation, the fact-value dichotomy. (e.g. Putnam 1985 and 2002). Like the classical pragmatists, Putnam believes that all knowledge of fact presupposes value judgements (Putnam 2003: 60). In this he echoes the view of Dewey who denied the existence of a dividing line between moral and scientific knowledge or facts and values and who argued, 'to frame a theory of knowledge which makes it necessary to deny the validity of moral ideas, or else to refer them to some other and separate kind of universe from that of common sense and science, is both provincial and arbitrary.' (Dewey *Essays* : 1908: 53).

(II) Fallibilism: All beliefs are open to revision and all interpretations and methods of enquiry have a provisional authority only. (Putnam 1994: 152). This is a philosophical position also common to the classical pragmatists, Dewey, James and Peirece (Putnam 2003: 60).

(III) Antiscepticism: 'pragmatists hold that doubt requires justification just as much as belief does' (Putnam 1994a: 152).

(IV) The thesis that practice, including practical reason, is primary in philosophy. (Putnam 1994a: 152 and 1995), or what may be seen as the core thesis of pragmatism new and old.

(V) Jamesian pluralism: the view that our views of the world reflect our interests and values and that our interpretations of the world are correct given the interests relevant to the context of those interpretations. (From Baghramian 2006: ??)

In additions, at various point in his career Putnam has resorted to specific ideas drawn from the work of classical pragmatists to further his own philosophical position. One such example is his now rjected appeal to the epistemic notion of idealised rational acceptability, in *Realism with a Human Face* for instance, he appealed to the Deweyan notion of warrant (short for the Deweyan technical notion of 'warranted assertibility') and argued that:

In ordinary circumstances, there is usually a fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not ... 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. (Putnam 1990: 21)

However, Putnam has also explicitly stated that he is not a pragmatist (Ruth-Anna Putnam 2002:7) Indeed in more recent years, he has come to be seen as distinctly out of sympathy with pragmatism. There are two reasons for this recoil. First, Putnam has always rejected what he sees as the Rortyan readings of classical Pragmatism because of its relativistic undertones. He argues that contrary to the relativistic interpretations of pragmatism, propagted by Richard Rorty, we are 'committed to regarding some views of the world - and, for that matter, some interests and values - as better than others.' (Putnam 1990: 210). The second reason for the recoil relates to the type of quietism about philosophy and aversion to all types of metaphyscis that he finds in Rorty in particular but also in some aspects of classical pragmatism.

The paper investigates the changes in Putnam's thinking about relativism and the consequence it has for understanding of pragmatism in general.

Rorty and Dewey on Fuzziness and Structure

AINE MAHON, University College Dublin

In his article "Education as Socialization and as Individualization", Richard Rorty argues that education involves two complementary stages. In the first stage the learner becomes acquainted with the central moral and political ideals of her society. In the second stage she becomes mobilized to question these ideals from within. These processes are distinct and they are equally necessary. Picturing the process of education in this way, Rorty seeks a rapprochement between what he pictures as leftist and rightist educational ideals. In his dichotomy, the former elevate freedom to the detriment of truth and the latter elevate truth to the detriment of freedom.

Rorty, aligning himself with the pedagogical theory of John Dewey, advocates instead that "truth" is an unhelpful term to use. In Rorty's re-description, Dewey did not try to justify a democratic education at all. Instead of a model of education what Dewey offered were "inspiring narratives and fuzzy utopias". Building on Dewey's emphasis on educational structure as well as freedom, Rorty suggests that socialization is temporally prior to individualization. In Rorty's own words, "education for freedom cannot begin before some constraints have been imposed".

While Dewey has long been considered the pre-eminent philosopher of American education, several commentators have argued that Rorty's contingent vocabularies fail to rally those Deweyan groups in pursuit of democratic or educational goals. Rorty's interpretation of Dewey, in other words, not only misrepresent the central tenets of the latter's philosophy but profoundly skew his educational visions.

I argue in this paper that the trade-off that Rorty encourages – foregrounding the attractive and the inspirational over the "literal" Dewey – is in line with one of the central tenets of his own philosophy: that the interesting and attractive (philosophers, metaphors, vocabularies, ideas) drive scientific and philosophical progress, that "re-description" is the real motor of intellectual change. Thus, if Rorty obscures Dewey's metaphysical and scientistic aspects this is arguably in the name of rehabilitating his educational theories for a neopragmatist audience. One could argue that Rorty in fact honours the legacy of Dewey's pragmatism by refusing to allow his work to atrophy in its historical moment.

This paper presses further on the Rorty/Dewey debate by using the current educational reform in the Irish secondary school system as a case study.

Pragmatic Anti-representationalism: A Family Therapy

SARIN MARCHETTI, University College Dublin

The main aim of the paper is that of charting the neo-pragmatist strategies for anti-representationalism in the contemporary pragmatist landscape. If it can be confidently say that the attack, deflation, or neutralization of representationalism has been a steady mark of the pragmatist philosophical agenda (this is in fact a theme shared by virtually all pragmatist thinkers, classical, recent, and contemporary), still we find not only a great variety of versions and strategies of anti-representationalism within pragmatism, but competing accounts of it as well. If thus most if not all pragmatists would agree that the refutation of the privileged picture of the world as something to copy (rather than to cope with) lies at the heart of pragmatism's anti-essentialism (about norms, claims of knowledge, and conducts), the ways in which they cash out such conviction greatly differ and clash with each other. The story of pragmatism can in fact be told from the point of view of the internal adjustments and criticism of the theory and practice of anti-representationalism.

In particular, I shall focus on the anti-representationalist aims and strategies of Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom and Huw Price, which animated the pragmatist philosophical scene for the past thirty years and fostered the debate between pragmatism and other kindred philosophical projects such as hermeneutics, philosophical analysis, and pragmatics. Such

advancements often took the form of direct and not so direct exchanges, in which each author tried to polish and qualify his own conception by contrasting it with the ones defended by their fellow pragmatists. My interpretative claim is that the metaphilosophical disagreement between Rorty, Brandom and Price can be explained in the light of their different readings of the pragmatist ascendant in twentieth century philosophy, and in particular of Wittgenstein's contribution to (and place in) it. Equally convinced of the necessity and advantages of integrating the lesson of classical pragmatism with the linguistic turn (and in particular with the Wittgensteinian version of it –as contrasted, e.g. with Carnap's), these authors disagree about the meta-philosophical nature and practical consequences of such hybrid version of pragmatism. Such differences, I shall claim, are as interesting and important as the similarities, as they reveal a number of different ways in which one can get rid of the idea that our practices of knowledge and action respond to the way things really are (hence resisting to ground such practices in metaphysics).

I shall thus contrast Rorty's therapeutic elucidation of anti-represenationalism – in which the acknowledgment of linguistic priority and the systematic application of the pragmatic maxim allow us to render perspicuous the implicit background of norms structuring and ruling our practices, of which no theoretical justification is however needed nor called for –, Brandom's systematic articulation of anti-representationalism – driven by the aspirations to account for and reconstruct semantics in terms of pragmatics, hence partially retrieving representationalism by means of a positive theory –, and Price's expressivist rendering of anti-representationalism – moved by the attempt to shift the very philosophical terrain from metaphysics to anthropology, from objects to vocabularies. In so doing I will distinguish not only three ways of reading the project of classical pragmatism, but also of reading Wittgenstein as a pragmatist fellow traveler who injected in it further philosophical steam.

A Deep Tension Within Pragmatism: Putnam and Price on Truth and Justification

FERGAL MCHUGH, University College Dublin

Putnam's third stage, in which he espouses a "direct" or "natural" realism is to be differentiated from a prior "metaphysical realist" stage (stage 1), an "internal realist" stage (stage 2). In each stage Putnam's realism is accompanied by a complimentary theory of truth. Early Putnam (stage 1) believed truth (in this case understood in terms of a realist correspondence theory), could outstrip justification. Stage 2, Putnam abandoned "metaphysical realism" in favour of "internal realism" a view, which was underwritten by a verificationist conception of truth as the "idealized" form of the best we can strive for by way of justification. Stage 3 Putnam, overturns, yet again his prior realist commitments and his associated view on truth. This Putnam argues for direct, unmediated epistemic access to the world an access that can be appreciated through turning our attention to our "ordinary" epistemic practices. The change is accompanied by an equivalent shift in his views on truth. However it has become increasingly difficult to decipher the role that truth plays in Putnam's realism. Stage 3 Putnam's account of truth owes a great deal to both the later Wittgenstein and to his engagement with the classical pragmatists. From both Wittgenstein and the Pragmatists Putnam takes on an "ordinary" conception of truth as expressed in practice. From Wittgenstein, Putnam develops a quasi-quietistic approach to truth: we must surrender the requirement for a theory of truth in favour of an approach that looks at the roles it plays in our epistemic practices. In this regard Putnam intersects with the views of fellow neo-pragmatist Huw Price. Both philosophers share a focus on practice and quietism with respect to inflationary approaches to truth. However the differ on what Price refers to as a "deep tension within pragmatism" (Price, 2011: 67), the status, the value and the philosophical respectability of identifying truth with justification. Price delivers a role-functional (or genealogical) account of truth that keeps its focus on practice. For Price this focus is retained through questioning the plausibility and efficacy of "substantial" approaches to truth. We need to be able to investigate the role of truth without asking what it "actually" is. From a methodological perspective this is achieved through resisting the bait offered by a link between truth and justification; this link carries us inevitably back toward the substantive question. In this move Price marks his divergence from a great many other pragmatists both

classical and contemporary. However Putnam refuses to sever the link between truth and justification. Stage 3 Putnam advocates an "ordinary" conception of truth and attributes to this ordinary conception a role for justification *and* a role for the intuition that truth can outstrip justification. For Price resisting the link between truth and justification is a feature of methodological hygiene, tasked with preventing re-inflation. Is Putnam's desire to keep the door open – no matter how narrowly – for a constructive account of truth (even if it is a "vulgar" or "ordinary one") an option that can actually be exercised, or does it threaten the coherence of the approach?