
Neo-pragmatism and metaphysics

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Abstract

According to arch-neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty the ‘world’ of the philosophers is ‘well lost’. With it must go their preoccupation of working out what is really ‘real’, as opposed to what is somehow merely appearance, as well as understanding the correlative notion of ‘representation’ that is requisite to making sense of this distinction. Following in Nietzsche’s footsteps, Rorty thinks we should no more bow down to ‘the world’ than our predecessors did to ‘God’. Yet abandoning the ‘true world’ does not enunciate a form of idealism, but rather a deflation of philosophical ambition. As Nietzsche wrote: ‘We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one’.

To what extent and in what way does neo-pragmatism herald an end to metaphysical theorizing? This question may seem to answer itself, insofar as one who accepts the above line of thought will see it as diagnosing the pretense that metaphysics involves. However, we believe it is worth dwelling on the question, for several, interrelated reasons. To start with, it is not obvious that one who accepts Rorty’s negative, anti-representationalist arguments, will agree with his positive proposal that our chief intellectual efforts as philosophers should in the future be turned towards achieving a freer, less cruel global society. Secondly there is the issue of *what it is* to do metaphysics, and indeed whether a philosopher can avoid it. Adrian Moore, in his compendious *The Evolution of the Modern Metaphysics* (CUP 2012), defines it as ‘the most general attempt to make sense of things’ – where this has an essentially self-conscious aspect that requires we make sense in terms of *what it is to make sense of things*. Moreover, he includes Nietzsche and other as-traditionally-conceived ‘anti-metaphysical’ philosophers like Hume, Carnap, Quine and Wittgenstein in his purview of attempts to do this (arguing they achieve their goal with varying degrees of success).

A third issue concerns a prevalent view in analytical philosophy that any view that falls short of realism is *ipso facto* a form of idealism; and connectedly that metaphysical questions are necessarily prior to any semantic views about how our words relate to reality. This is defended by amongst others Michael Devitt and John Searle, and needs to be addressed. And finally, though by no means leastly, there is a more ‘in-house’ problem within neo-pragmatism itself, concerning whether it can or indeed should consistently uphold a non- or anti-metaphysical self-understanding, even on a restricted conception of what a ‘metaphysical self-understanding’ might involve. Quine, for example, certainly counts a neo-pragmatist in virtue of his anti-representationalist conception of meaning, but was also concerned with understanding how our theories of the world and the world itself ‘hang together’ in an overall,

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naturalistic whole. This idea of ‘hanging together’ is of course reminiscent of Sellars conception of the aim of philosophy being ‘to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’. The slogan in itself may be of secondary importance, but Sellars’ very philosophical system challenges the idea that there is any essential tension between neo-pragmatism, construed as anti-representationalism, and systematic metaphysics. The recent neo-pragmatist work of Huw Price on global expressivism (*Naturalism without Mirrors*, OUP 2011) is also somewhat unclear in its attitude towards and not least in its implications for naturalistic metaphysics. Finally we should mention a recent movement in the philosophy of science, associated perhaps most explicitly with Ladyman & Ross (*Everything Must Go*, OUP 2007) but which plausibly enjoys a wider subscription, that distances itself from classical analytically drive metaphysics of David Lewis and Frank Jackson – which can be seen as presupposing representationalism – but nevertheless champions metaphysical theorizing as a branch of (fundamental) science. This idea of science spawning and/or needing metaphysics is also one that can apparently survive Rorty’s attack on ‘the world’.

We do not with the above mean to suggest that neo-pragmatism *doesn’t* pose a serious threat to various particular metaphysical projects, or certain prominent conceptions of what metaphysics involves, or indeed the very idea or point of metaphysics as a whole. However, we do think the issue is well worth exploring, and the contributions will aim in various different ways to throw light on the issue.

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