Pragmatism and the ontological turn in political theory

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Much recent work in political theory shares John Rawls' concern to avoid controversial religious and philosophical doctrines. However, some theorists continue to argue for the importance of examining such doctrines, in particular the role of ontology. On their view, the problem with the Rawlsian approach is that ontological presuppositions remain in our thinking even when we claim to have set them aside. These presuppositions are said for example to be implicit in the work of theorists who assume the existence of the autonomous self, and in political liberals who think it possible for the state to be neutral between competing conceptions of the good. In the light of what they take to be the inescapability of ontology, proponents of what has become known as the 'ontological turn' take their task to be that of investigating ontological issues directly.

This paper considers the ontological turn through an examination of the work of Richard Rorty and William Connolly. Rorty and Connolly are both sceptical of much contemporary philosophy, most notably the centrality Anglo-American thought affords to epistemology. Connolly is sympathetic to Rorty's criticisms of the aspirations and methodology of modern epistemology. However, he thinks that Rorty's position (and pragmatism more generally) is of limited political value because it contains implicit ontological presumptions which blunt its critical edge.

Specifically, on Connolly's interpretation pragmatism contains unacknowledged ontological commitments, both of which he challenges. First, he thinks that pragmatism assumes an 'ontology of concord', according to which differences of belief and value are ultimately reconcilable. Secondly, Connolly argues that pragmatism is committed to 'ontological narcissism', an ontology which assumes that once the idea that we must comport ourselves to the word of God or the structure of reality is set aside, we are free to choose our own ends without regard to anything other than our own interests.

In attributing these ontological commits to pragmatism, Connolly offers an insightful understanding of the charge that has long been levelled at pragmatism, which is that it is conservative, providing for no space for critical reflection on practice or the possibility of revising it. If Connolly is correct, these flaws stem from its mistaken ontological assumptions. This paper argues that this is an important set of objections, fruitful for our understanding of pragmatism, but that they are overstated. By examining Rorty's work and drawing out the ontological claims that Connolly finds in it, I show that social practice for pragmatists not committed to concord. Social practices are not simply sites of agreement, but also inevitably contain disagreement about how they might be interpreted and revised.

In making this argument, I go on to locate pragmatism in the context of recent discussion of agonistic democracy, to which Connolly has made an important contribution. Connolly does not share the Rousseauian impulse to free individuals from social norms. The issue rather is to attend to how social norms can inflict harm by reflecting on which norms are legitimate and how that is to be decided. Connolly proposes an 'ontology of discordance', allowing for space for very different projects and leaving space for moral and political pluralism. I suggest that, far from being committed to a complacent consensus, pragmatism is a philosophy

which acknowledges discord and contestation, and that it can and should embrace what Connolly calls 'a politics of agonistic respect'.