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Pragmatism in Philosophy: the Hidden Alternative

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Pragmatism is an alternative to the analytic tradition, which dominated Anglo-American philosophy in the twentieth century, and which still dictates the major part of work in many departments of philosophy. It is a real alternative, yet one that has struggled to make its voice heard, and is still curiously invisible. Partly this is because, like so many philosophical ‘-isms’ pragmatism comes in different flavors. The approach I am going to describe does not always fit things said by the classic American pragmatists, Peirce, James, and Dewey, for example. And it has only a rather suspicious relationship with another philosopher who has proudly flaunted the label, Richard Rorty. Indeed, it may show more in common with older empiricists, including Berkeley and Hume, although Wittgenstein must be included as a major progenitor. It is therefore not a new kid on the block, but it has perhaps only recently grown from being an ugly duckling into a mature swan, or so I shall argue.

In order to appreciate its distinctive nature, we need to begin with some problems. Some that puzzle most philosophers have to do with what is traditionally thought of as metaphysics. Our world is often predictable and familiar. It is inhabited by nice, solid, reliable, objects. Things follow orderly patterns. We know them, by our senses, and we can remember what we know, referring to them and thinking about them. These thoughts involve different categories, but it is when we reflect upon them that the familiar gives way to the strange and bewildering. Thus we think of nature as law-governed—but then the philosophical imp whispers the question in our ear: what is a law of nature, and how does it govern anything? We think that things could have been otherwise, for better or worse—but the imp asks what are these alternative possibilities, and how do we know about them? We believe that things could have been better or worse—but the imp asks what are these values we invoke as we think this, and again, how do we know about them, and why do we care about them? We can cite arithmetic as a paradigm of human knowledge—but the imp asks what numbers are and, again, by what means we know about them.

These are questions of the form “what is...something or other?” A direct answer would seem to be modeled on a paradigm of successful intellectual inquiry, analytical chemistry. You take the substance you are investigating, and take it apart to see how it is made up. “Analytical metaphysics” looks at the elusive beasts in the philosophical jungle, such as natural laws, alternative possibilities, values, numbers, and others in the same spirit. Break them apart and see what they are made up of. This is what I shall call the analytical-metaphysical paradigm, and I believe it has dominated recent philosophy to the point at which other

approaches are invisible to many writers.

However, there is an alternative tradition, which slightly adjusts the question. It says that it is no good looking to see what laws or possibilities or values or numbers are “made up of.” They are not substances you can put under a microscope or on a petri dish or in a retort. They are categories with which we think. The key to understanding them, therefore, is to see what good such thinking does for us. What is its function and purpose? You might answer that question by giving a “just-so” story or evolutionarily plausible sketch of how such thinking might have arisen, and you could do that without ever getting a picture of what the apparent subject matter of such thought “is.” Metaphysics would bow out of the picture; uses and purposes would take their place.

What we have here is a distinction of two approaches to understanding elements in the way we think. One way would be to think of the world as requiring or demanding or needing that way of thought, since otherwise we would fail to represent an aspect of the world properly. There would be truths or facts that we would be missing out. Advancing this as *the best explanation* of the value of the framework of thought can be called *representationalism*. Its stock-in-trade will include truth-conditions, facts, truth-makers and reference: elements of the world that together make up the subject matter.

The other way is to give an anthropology or genealogy, a story of the function served by the framework or way of thought. If this is told without drawing on the ontology of the framework itself (without drawing on the things to which it refers) this is *pragmatism*. Other words that come to mind are instrumentalism, constructivism and so on.

The embargo on drawing on the very things to which the way of thought in question refers is that if we did we might use “referring to numbers” to explain why we go in for arithmetic, “referring to possible worlds” to explain why we think in terms of modality, or “referring to values” to explain why we think normatively or ethically. But if these pop up in the pragmatist explanation, then there will be no clear water between the two approaches. You might as well stick with representation from the beginning (we have arithmetic because we need to represent numbers; modal categories in order to explore possibilities; ethics because we need to represent values...). To get an illuminating, non-metaphysical story, say pragmatists, we have to do better than this. We must measure the good such thinking achieves in some different currency.

This embargo does not ban us from mentioning the laws, values, possibilities or other ‘things’ talked about in the discourse in *every* context. In non-philosophical contexts you may well do so. Why is there no way of divvying up the marbles between the two players fairly? Because there are seven marbles and seven is an odd number. Why is Johnny so nice? Because he was brought up well. Why do people not arise from being dead? Because it is impossible. According to the

pragmatist there is nothing intrinsically incorrect about these. But they do not provide the routes to understanding what we are about in employing the difficult categories in the first place.

Although pragmatism contrasts with representationalism, this does not mean that pragmatists must eschew any notion of representation.¹ Indeed, I argue that they cannot do without it, for it is a harmless part of everyday thought. Just as the thermometer represents the temperature, so a historian can represent the court life of Charles II, and for that matter do so in many different ways: as tragedy, as farce, as civilized, and so on. Where pragmatism is distinctive is in holding that representation is nevertheless not the key concept to deploy when the philosophical imp is tormenting us. It is not the way to understand the kind of thought or the part of language in question, whereas a different focus on the function of terms in the lives of thinkers and talkers, is the better option.

Pragmatist explanations may be offered in an unmasking, debunking spirit, as in Nietzsche or Foucault. We think some particular way, they say, only because we are flawed: weak, or slavish, or corrupt, or chained by distorting social and economic forces. But pragmatist explanations may also be offered in a perfectly friendly, perhaps even “bunking” spirit, as in Hume’s genealogy of justice in Bk III of the *Treatise*, or, I would say, Wittgenstein’s pragmatic approach to mathematics in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. By showing us in unmistakable terms what is achieved by thinking in terms of justice (Hume) or numbers (Wittgenstein) we are given an explanation of the point of the categories. And en route we acquire defenses against sceptics who return baffled from failed attempts at a representationalist insight, and counsel that we should junk these categories altogether.

This program for pragmatism is essentially local not global. It takes discourse one chunk at a time. You might have theory of one shape about science, a different one about ethics, a third about mathematics, a fourth about possibilities, and so on. This may put a question mark over pragmatism as a global, overarching story, but the contrast here is also delicate, and will occupy us later.

Meanwhile, however there is another beast prowling in the contemporary jungle. This is deflationism about truth. A great many people have thought that deflationism in some way undermines pragmatism.

2. Deflationism

So far I have presented pragmatism in terms of a story about why *we are thinking and speaking in these terms*. We now need to recognize that any such story is going to need to harmonize with a story about *what* we’re doing speaking in these terms. Here representationalists feel they are on solid ground, and ground that is forbidden to pragmatists. They can say that we are doing what we usually

do when we make assertions. We are trying to tell the truth. If we are talking about possibilities, we are saying how the possibilities stand; if we are talking about values, saying how the values stand, and so on. We are describing how things are. But if we say this, they claim, we have no alternative but to plunge into the deep waters of metaphysics and say what these things themselves are. Possibilities, values, numbers have to be put under the analytic-metaphysical microscope again.

But why should this be plausible? Can a pragmatist not say that we are right about values, when we say that peace is better than war, or about numbers when we say that twice two are four, without setting sail on seas of metaphysics? Deflationism is the view of truth that comes to his rescue. In effect it claims that truth is too little to sustain any interesting theory. It is not a “robust” or “chunky” property with a nature of its own. Instead, calling things true or not true is a kind of logical device that introduces no new topic of its own, rather as when you say that cows go moo and sheep go baaa that term “and” introduces no new topic beyond cows and sheep. This is proved when we notice that there is nothing to understanding “A is true” where A is some arbitrary assertion, beyond understanding that it is equivalent to A itself. “It is true that cows go moo” just comes to the same thing as “cows go moo.” Why should we have such an apparently redundant piece of verbiage? Because it enables us to collect together and generalize about assertions and to refer to them indirectly. “Everything Washington said was true” is a useful enough thing to say. It assures us that if we could list Washington’s assertions, say A, A₁, A₂..., we would be able to endorse all of them: if Washington said A then A; if Washington said A₁ then A₁, and so on to the end. We do not need the notion of truth once we have got the list: it works, as it were, to put us in a waiting state until we do, when we can jettison it. As I like to put it, when Pilate asked, “What is truth?” the right answer was not to scratch our beards and look wise but dumbfounded. The right answer was to ask what Pilate was interested in. Once he has told us that (e.g. whether this chap is a troublemaker) we can tell him what the truth of the matter will be: it will be true that he is a troublemaker if and only if he is a troublemaker.²

Slightly more formally we can say that pragmatism holds:

- (A) That there is complete cognitive equivalence between Tp and p.
- (B) That conforming to that equivalence is all that is required to manifest complete understanding of the truth predicate “...is true.”
- (C) That the utility of the predicate is logical: it is a device on indirect reference and generalization.

A pragmatist clearly need have no quarrel with this deflationist approach to the notion of truth. Indeed, he should positively rejoice in it, for it is itself an example of pragmatism in action. Rather than look at what the notion of truth

represents or stands for (some mysterious relation that philosophers and logicians never quite managed to pin down), you look at what is its actual function.³ Deflationists are doing exactly what pragmatists counsel.

But now the landscape becomes confused. Doesn't this imply that representationalists, who after all took truth and fact to be their own private preserve, the very things they wanted to put under their analytic microscope, have won after all? Answer: no. Deflationism *does* imply that you can happily end up talking of truth, representation, fact and so forth. You get them for free, once you have the indicative sentence that you are happy to assert. But deflationism *does not* imply that these are the best terms needed to explain what you are doing in making the assertion, using the language in question.

Since in my experience people find it very difficult to see clearly here, I shall illustrate the distinctive nature of this approach with two well-known examples from history, which also illustrate how important it may be not to assume that the analytical-metaphysical paradigm must have been that under which our great predecessors operated. The first is that of Hume. In the case of values and of causation equally Hume gives a non-descriptive or non-representational *functional* story about the minds of those using the vocabulary. The causally competent speaker expresses a kind of commitment to a regularity, a determination in the mind that this pattern is one to be relied upon and used to govern expectations.⁴ Similarly, the user of values expresses an attitude, a kind of love or desire for something, or aversion to something, that is also public in the sense of commended to others or demanded of them. In each case there is also a story about the input: the kinds of quality that set us off into these functional states. In the case of causation it is exposure to regularities, and in the case of values it is appreciating qualities of mind that are "useful or agreeable to ourselves or others." Actually, in Hume each case is slightly more complex than this, but that gives the overall shape. So what are causes (or laws of nature) and values? Bad question. The philosophy finishes with its account of what we are doing using the categories.

Historically this is particularly important, since the twentieth century emphasis on the analytical-metaphysical paradigm rendered Hume's actual theory quite invisible. Hence Hume was often billed as a "regularity theorist," and therefore a target for easy refutations by writers pointing out no more than he always admitted, which is that in the meaning and use that we give to the vocabulary of causation we intend more than to describe regularities. We signal that the regularity has a certain status in our own minds, or in other words that we ourselves are in a different functional state than we would be if we simply recorded, passively as it were, a regular pattern in events. We become "determined" to make inferences beyond what we have experiences, and it is this determination that is signaled with the use of causal categories.⁵

It ought to be obvious that this pragmatist account of what we are doing

can coexist with happily continuing to use the vocabulary. It is not a debunking explanation of anything. Indeed in its capacity to ward off skepticism about the propriety of causal categories, as was voiced, for instance, by Russell, it is potentially bunking.⁶ Yet other commentators, again locked into the analytical-metaphysical paradigm, have produced passages in which Hume uses causal vocabulary as showing that he was fundamentally a “realist” about causation, or in other words toiling in the same metaphysical mines that they themselves work. They cannot see that Hume’s gaze is directed differently, as indeed it has to be given his empiricist commitments, as well as his mistrust of metaphysics. It is the psychology of the user that is expressed in the application of causal vocabulary, and this psychology is not to be understood representationally. Exactly the same remarks apply to the sister problem of our use of evaluative and normative thought.⁷

Of course, it is one thing to identify what Hume’s theory is, and another to argue that it is correct. Although it is a detour from the main thesis of this paper, it may be worth spending a paragraph fending off one common objection, or family of objections. Thus some have said that in the case of causation, the phenomenology of just seeing balls shunt each other about, or break windows, or water splash people or just feeling the pressure of a weight on your hand gives you “direct experience” of causation.⁸ So Hume’s theory is as it were undercut: if we can observe causation, we don’t need a pragmatic approach to it. But this is wrong. Hume makes no prediction about how sensitivity to regularity may alter our perceptual mechanisms. There could be a feedback, just as there is, for instance, when exposure to a foreign language alters how it is heard. All kinds of interpretations of things can be said to be observed by the prepared subject. But all the same, Hume’s may be the right account of what that preparation amounts to. In the case of values for instance, it amounts to being quick to feel love and admiration for qualities of mind that just “look” good (the mother’s smile at the baby for instance). In the case of causation there is an undoubted advantage in being very quick indeed to interpret events in terms of the causal lines they manifest, and we are indeed framed to be almost comically eager to do that. The psychologist Albert Michotte investigated how we impose these interpretations, actually seeing things as pushing, leading, or chasing each other, even with the bare perceptual clues provided by colored balls on a screen.⁹ But none of that provides a difficulty for Hume. Hume is not saying that the prepared mind also needs to make an inference as well as seeing or experiencing familiar events. This would only be so if the “seeing” were a bare given, a kind of neutral impact available alike to the experienced mind and that of some infant completely unversed in the ways things unfold in the world. But Hume has and needs no such claim. The seeings of an experienced adult can be seeings *as* one thing or another, but the point remains that the theory is one of a cognitive adaptation, not one of the reception of a metaphysically curious part of the world.

The second admirable historical example I pick is that of Berkeley:

Besides, the communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language, as is commonly supposed. There are other ends, as the raising of some passion, the exciting to or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition~to which the former is in many cases barely subservient, and sometimes entirely omitted, when these can be obtained without it, as I think does not infrequently happen in the familiar use of language.¹⁰

Like Hume, Berkeley was particular suspicious of our ability to form any “idea” of “force.” Yet he appreciated that it was an essential element in Newtonian mechanics. So we had to pursue a different, pragmatist, approach to its meaning:

And yet I presume you allow there are very useful propositions and theorems relating to force that contain useful truths: for instance, that a body with conjunct forces describes the diagonal of a parallelogram in the same time that it would the sides with separate. Is this not a principle of very extensive use? Does not the doctrine of the composition and resolution of forces depend upon it, and in consequence thereof numberless rules and theorems, directing men how to act and explaining phenomena throughout the mechanics and mathematical philosophy? And if by considering this doctrine of force, men arrive at the knowledge of many inventions in mechanics, and are taught to frame Engines by means of which things difficult and otherwise impossible may be performed, and if the same doctrine which is so beneficial here below, serves also as a key to discover the nature of the celestial motions, shall we deny that it is of use, either in practice or speculation, because we have no distinct idea of force?¹¹

Berkeley also applied this approach to other categories, including those of action and agency and the self. So instead of engendering metaphysical nightmares, our actual thinking in terms of selves and their properties, or agency and its nature, turns out to have its own place and its own utility in our lives. It is only philosophers pursuing a metaphysical approach who become entangled in problems, say, of personal identity or of freedom of the will.

Berkeley’s way of putting his view is not, of course compulsory. The pragmatist may wish to say that we do after all have an “idea” of force or causation, meaning perhaps only that we have a use for these terms in everyday life and in physical theory. In other words, we need not share the view common to Berkeley and Hume, that ideas should be confined to sensory impressions. This is not important, compared to their insight that the fundamental explanation of the

way we think in these terms is very different from, for instance, the fundamental explanation of why we think in terms of colour. In the latter case, but not the former, experience as it were delivers the upshot in the simplest possible way. In the more complex cases more complex mechanisms are involved, and this of course is why the philosophical imp has more to say when we begin to reflect on them.

A third honorable ancestor of contemporary pragmatism is one that I have dwelt on elsewhere, and shall not rehearse here.¹² It is sufficient to say that once we are properly sensitized to the distinct nature of a pragmatist approach to perplexing areas of philosophy, Wittgenstein's work leaps out to the eye as an outstanding example. In every one of the worked examples of the later philosophy, it is the *use* of the categories in question that he explores—and the use is never described in flat-footed representationalist terms. Wittgenstein never contents himself with saying, for instance, that with sensation talk we represent our sensations, with ethical talk we represent our values, or with religious talk we represent our gods. We do other things: we express or give voice to feelings, we take up stances towards the world, we swim in the various swirls of life. Again, it is not my purpose to say that he is obviously successful in exorcising the urge to metaphysics. With consciousness, for instance, only a minority of philosophers probably remain convinced that his explorations render redundant the whole subsequent literature on qualia, or higher-order functionalism, or the whole industry of trying to relate the “purple haze” of mental events to the prosaic happenings in our brains and central nervous systems. Still, I confess to being among them: it seems clear to me that no good can come of thinking of consciousness in terms of a layer of mental facts or properties overlaying and yet somehow distinct from the rest of brains and bodies. Rather, we should, like Wittgenstein, be thinking about the distinctive role that attributions of thought, belief, desire and other mental states play in our expectations of each other and our interactions with each other—the uses of mental vocabulary in the myriad interactions of everyday life.

3. Problems and Prospects

I hope it has been clear that the debate between representationalists and pragmatists is essentially one about *explanation*. And there is no presumption that the kind of explanation that works in one area will transfer easily to another. It is, for instance, relatively easy to see what the functional account of moral or normative categories would look like, and perhaps not too difficult to see what the parallel account of causal and modal categories would involve. But in other cases, such as that of mental categorization, the functional value of a way of thinking may defy easy description. Again, in a case such as that of religious belief, it may be easy to sketch some attitudes typically expressed by the devout, but it may be harder to

be sure that these exhaust the intended meaning of the language in use. In each case you simply have to aim for the most sensitive and adequate description of the actual functions in question.

It might be suggested that pragmatism, conceived of like this, is not in fact an alternative to an analytical-metaphysical paradigm, or at least an analytical paradigm, since it merely changes the focus of analysis. Instead of analyzing “what causation is,” for instance, it would be analyzing what people who think in terms of causal categories are doing, and similarly across the board. I think there are two remarks to make about this. The first is that there is no reason for the result of such analysis, if that is what is given, to have much to do with metaphysics. By offering an explanation of our thought that avoids the idea of representation, we close off the avenues that lead to metaphysics. The results will be in cognitive psychology, not metaphysics. And secondly, there is no reason to confine the method of *describing* the cognitive structures in question to *analyzing* anything in the traditional philosophical sense. Wittgenstein’s way of putting the goal of his inquiries is helpful here. He asked for a “perspicuous representation” (an *übersichtliche Darstellung*) of what we are doing, and there is no reason that this should not be given by discursive descriptions rather than by analyses of a traditional kind.

The analytical-metaphysical tradition does not die quietly, of course. It may retain a hold on us in cases in which no feasible explanation of what we are doing suggests itself as a rival to saying that we describe how things are. This may be so when we consider those things we talk about which it is compulsory to regard as parts of the environment to which we respond, such as middle-sized dry goods. Here things become tricky, because even the most innocent description of such things will import ideas of causation, of counterfactuals, and of space and time. A chair, for instance, resists penetration, supports weights, interrupts vision and motion, and persists through time. Yet these are very much the categories which do not correspond to the empiricists’ “ideas,” and about which they looked for the other kinds of explanation that I have been describing. Perhaps after all we do have to go global, finding pragmatist explanations in every corner of our intellectual economy.

A second stronghold of the analytical-metaphysical paradigm is supposed to be provided by formal logic. Only representationalists, some think, have a good understanding of inference, in terms of the impossibility of premises being true without conclusions being so. The idea is that they alone see inferential relations as well explained in terms of truth preservation. When pragmatists try to mimic these explanations in terms of the commitments of competent speakers, either they fail to underwrite classical logical forms of inference, or actively fall into errors, dubbing inferences as valid when they are not, or vice versa.¹³ This is indeed tricky territory, and one that can engender a quite Byzantine literature.¹⁴

But there are shining examples of success, such as Ramsey's proof that subjective probabilities must obey the classical axioms of probability.¹⁵ And especially in the light of deflationism, there is no reason to suppose that mention of "truth-conditions" underwrites logic rather than merely codifying the forms we are determined to use in any case.

There is a remaining question about the scope of our explanatory ambitions. Some philosophers, quietists, believe these should be quite minimal. We should learn not to listen to the philosophical imp, and instead of seeking to silence him by investigation and understanding, give ourselves what therapies enable us to ignore him (this is also one strand in Rorty). But I hope that pragmatists do not find this attitude particularly useful. Even if we think that Berkeley, Hume, or Wittgenstein have not quite managed to answer the imp, I do not see how it can be denied that they open up a highly attractive vista of the way to do so. And given the almost uniform failures of the analytical-metaphysical paradigm, we cannot afford to ignore the alternative landscape on offer.

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Notes

- ¹ I fear that Richard Rorty fell into the trap of supposing that it must, in the many writings following *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
- ² Deflationism could have alerted Rorty that far from being the property only of “metaphysical prigs,” as he suggested, truth is as free as air, and no more a possible target of suspicion than, say, conjunction.
- ³ Quine, himself a deflationist, described its function slightly differently, in terms of giving us an easy inference from facts about the world to facts about sentences, in the process called semantic ascent. But I believe thinking of indirect reference and generalization is better, since these describe relatively obvious needs that people are going to have, whereas going up and down the semantic ladder is more a pastime for logicians. It also introduces fertile ground on which the weeds of use/mention ambiguity can grow.
- ⁴ The idea that our category of causation somehow has its home in our activities, by giving us recipes for action, is very well established. See for an early example, Douglas Gasking “Causation and Recipes” *Mind* Vol. 64, No. 256 (Oct., 1955), pp. 479-487.
- ⁵ See, for instance, Bk I, Part III, Sec. xiv of the *Treatise*, Selby-Bigge, p. 156.
- ⁶ Russell, B. “On the Notion of Cause.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* v. 13. 1913, pp. 1-26.
- ⁷ For further remarks on the “New Hume” movement, see my “Hume and Thick Connexions” in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- ⁸ Elizabeth Anscombe “Causality and Determination,” in Sosa, E. (ed.), *Causation and Conditionals* (Oxford Readings in Philosophy), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- ⁹ Michotte’s work is well illustrated at cogweb.ucla.edu/Discourse/Narrative/michotte-demo.swf
- ¹⁰ George Berkeley, Introduction to the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §20.

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¹¹ George Berkeley, *Alciphron*, VII.

¹² Simon Blackburn “Wittgenstein’s Irrealism” in *Practical Tortoise Raising and Other Philosophical Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹³ Energetic criticism along these lines can be found in Mark Shroeder, *Being For*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁴ The description has been applied to my own approaches to this in the case of values, in papers such as “Attitudes and Contents” in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, op. cit. Robert Brandom’s works, such as *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000) can engender the same worry.

¹⁵ Ramsey, F. P. 1926 “Truth and Probability” in D. H. Mellor, ed., *Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.