

Metaphysical Pluralism: James and the Neo-Pragmatists

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Pragmatism has often been characterized as a non-metaphysical or even anti-metaphysical philosophical movement. Not only are there well-known and influential neo-pragmatists like Hilary Putnam or Richard Rorty, who argue decidedly against metaphysics as a valid aim or discipline of philosophy, there is also an ongoing discussion as to how metaphysical the classical pragmatists themselves actually were (e.g. Myers 2004; Pihlström 2007; Seigfried 2001). The focus of my paper lies on William James's pluralistic pragmatism and its metaphysical implications. Let me state upfront that I do not believe James in general to be anti-metaphysical in any strong or interesting way. If one considers his complete works the most metaphysics-critical conclusion one could draw would probably be that no metaphysical theory has been proven yet and maybe can't be proven in a purely theoretical way. However, I think it is a legitimate question if James *should* have been more critical of metaphysics given some of his own assumptions in

Pragmatism. It is, therefore, no surprise that his pragmatism has been interpreted as anti-metaphysical. If and in what way these interpretations are justified will be discussed in the following.

I will only briefly mention three examples of the anti-metaphysical school of thought in neo-pragmatism and their interpretation of classical pragmatism, before turning to James's pragmatism in more detail. According to Charlene Haddock Seigfried the pragmatists claimed, "that metaphysics was the problem, not the solution" (2001, 13). "The centuries-long philosophical efforts to develop a metaphysics was considered by them at least a distraction from the concrete concerns of everyday life and at most a tragic detour away from everything that gives value and meaning to life." (Ibid.) James's attacks on rationalistic metaphysics and his empiricist emphasis on concrete facts and experiences did not, in Seigfried's interpretation, lead him to a rival metaphysical hypothesis of some sort of process-ontology, but to a methodological alternative altogether. "[T]he pragmatists didn't just take an anti-positivistic turn; they didn't just reject the traditional subject areas of metaphysics. They grounded their analyses in the concrete conditions of everyday life. It is time to recognize that the formulation and analysis of these concrete conditions is a genuine alternative to metaphysics." (Ibid., 14) Though Rorty's anti-representationalist neo-pragmatism certainly differs from classical pragmatism, James is sometimes blamed for paving the way for this kind of relativistic "post-Philosophy", that urges us to give up epistemology and metaphysics altogether (cf. Rescher 2000, 63f.). In Rorty's opinion, knowledge is not "a matter of getting reality right, but rather [...] a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality." (Rorty 1991, 1) This is also reflected in his reading of James.

"In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together in the dark, not our hope of getting things right. James, in arguing against realists and idealists that 'the trail of the human serpent is over all,' was reminding us that our glory is in our participation in fallible and transitory human projects, not in our obedience to permanent nonhuman constraints." (Rorty 1982, 166)

More realistic than Rorty, but still anti-metaphysical, is Putnam's internal realism which he opposes to the metaphysical realism often found in modern analytic philosophy. Metaphysical realism is described as follows:

"On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relations between words or thought-signs and external things and

sets of things. I shall call this perspective the *externalist* perspective, because its favorite point of view is a God's Eye point of view." (Putnam 1981, 49)

Internal realism, on the other hand, maintains,

"[...] that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description. [...] There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve." (Putnam 1981, 49f.)

Thus, for Putnam, it makes no sense to ask which objects *really*, i.e. metaphysically, exist.

"Metaphysical realists to this day continue to argue about whether points [...] are individuals or properties, particulars or mere limits, and so forth. My view is that God himself, if he consented to answer the question 'Do points really exist or are they mere limits?' would say 'I don't know'; not because His omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense." (Putnam 1990, 97)

There certainly is some textual basis for reading James's pragmatism as anti-metaphysical and there is a strong similarity between an anti-metaphysical reading of James's pragmatism and Putnam's internal realism. Obviously, James's pragmatism "turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" (P, 31) and towards concrete facts, experiences and actions. For James, the pragmatic meaning of some idea or theory consists of its practical consequences.

"It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one." (P, 30)

In the second lecture of *Pragmatism* James introduces pragmatism as a method only, that does not stand for any specific results but unstiffens all our theories and puts them to work like instruments. In "Pragmatism and Common Sense", the fifth lecture, James distinguishes three levels or stages of thought – common sense, science and critical philosophy – each of which describes and categorizes the world we live in differently.

"There are thus at least three well-characterized levels, stages or types of thought about the world we live in, and the notions of one stage have one kind of merit, those of another stage another kind. It is impossible, however, to say that any stage as yet in sight is absolutely more true than any other. [...] Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests for their veracity, and as a result we get confused. Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows." (P, 92-93)

The various categories we structure reality with are thus, for James, instrumental human discoveries, mental modes of adaption to reality rather than exact copies of reality. If conflicting theories have practical merit for different purposes or in different spheres of life, they may all be

considered pragmatically true in this respect. For truth in James's pragmatism is not the rationalistic notion of correspondence to a ready-made world beyond our experiences, "but something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to" (P, 98). Hence, theories have to be made true, verified, by our experiences with them.

"The essential thing is the process of being guided. Any idea that helps us to *deal*, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that fits, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality." (P, 102)

In "Pragmatism and Humanism", the seventh lecture, James stresses the dependence of ontology on our theories, purposes, interests and values. "What we say about reality thus depends on the perspective into which we throw it. The *that* of it is its own; but the *what* depends on the *which*; and the *which* depends on *us*." (P, 118) Hence, we ourselves in part create the world we live in, "you can't weed out the human contribution" (P, 122). Since our reality is relative to different perspectives, and these are relative to specific interests, James's philosophy becomes highly pluralistic.

„We have so many different businesses with nature that no one of them yields us an all-embracing clasp. The philosophic attempt to define nature so that no one lies outside the door saying ‚Where do *I* come in?‘ is sure in advance to fail. The most philosophy can hope for is not to lock out any interest forever.“ (PU, 19)

It should be pretty clear how these passages from James resemble the anti-metaphysical statements of the neo-pragmatists mentioned above. There is a strong emphasis on concrete life experiences, and the ontological structure of reality is relative to specific perspectives. Plus, James vehemently criticizes the rationalistic metaphysics of a ready-made world and a correspondence theory of truth that entails an inert, static relation to a world beyond our experiences.

However, there are other text passages in *Pragmatism* where James seems much more inclined to metaphysical speculation. If one does not read James as dismissing metaphysics altogether, it becomes important to ask, in what way his own philosophy might be metaphysical. For that purpose two forms of metaphysics can be distinguished: the Aristotelian or transcendent metaphysics and the Kantian or critical (transcendental) metaphysics (cf. Pihlström 2007).

"The *Aristotelian* metaphysician, starting from Aristotle's famous view of 'first philosophy' as a science of 'Being *qua* Being', an inquiry into 'first principles', tries to identify the basic ontological categories of Being itself, of a world ontologically independent of human conceptual categorization. In contrast, the *Kantian* thinker—the transcendental philosopher—rejects such a claim, urging that we cannot know anything about Being as such, or about the things in themselves. The world's or Being's 'own' categorical structure is forever, necessarily, beyond our cognitive reach. Thus, when studying ontological categories, we study the forms of our thought about reality, our conceptual schemes, the basic features of our experiencing and talking about the world, and so on. We cannot directly examine the world itself, but we can examine the way(s) we take the world to be." (Ibid., 6)

Sami Pihlström (2007; 2009) argues that pragmatist metaphysics must be a form of critical metaphysics and (re)interprets James's pragmatism in this way. This James-interpretation has the advantage of taking the practical and ethical importance of some metaphysical disputes into account, which is actually highlighted by James's pragmatic method, while still considering the humanized structure of reality. Pragmatism does not render all metaphysical disputes insignifi-

cant, but only those, which make no practical difference. James's turn to the concrete experiences of ordinary life does therefore not dismiss metaphysical theories; it examines their practical meaning and their importance for our lives in the presence and especially in the future. The alternative between a purely materialistic world and a spiritualistic one, for instance, is pragmatically highly relevant:

“The need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast. [...] Here then, in these different emotional and practical appeals, in these adjustments of our concrete attitudes of hope and expectation, and all the delicate consequences which their differences entail, lie the real meanings of materialism and spiritualism – not in hair-splitting abstractions about matter's inner essence, or about the metaphysical attributes of God. Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; spiritualism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope. Surely here is an issue genuine enough, for anyone who feels it: and, as long as men are men, it will yield matter for a serious philosophic debate.” (P, 55)

Since Pihlström is reading James's pragmatism as metaphysical in a critical sense, it is only the humanly categorized structure of the world that we can examine. “[T]he Jamesian pragmatist should not be committed to the view that the concept of ‘the nature of reality in general’, as standardly employed, even makes sense. The nature of reality in any humanly meaningful sense is always subordinated to the (transcendental) categorizing and conceptualizing activities we engage in within our practices, seeking to satisfy our pragmatic needs.” (Pihlström 2007, 22) The truth of a metaphysical theory is therefore based on anthropological conditions.

“To find out that a metaphysical view about, say, freedom or immortality is humanly acceptable, or satisfies some of our deepest natural human needs, is *eo ipso* to find out that it is pragmatically true, in James's sense. Conversely, to find out that a metaphysical position is such that we cannot *live* on the basis of it, or cannot *really believe* it to be true while continuing to engage in the world in the habitual ways we simply cannot give up (e.g., for ethical reasons), is to find out that it is pragmatically false.” (Ibid., 21)

While I agree, that truth is radically humanized in James's pragmatism, there is one important implication of Pihlström's Kantian pragmatism that I doubt can be ascribed to James: the denial of the assumption “that there is a prior, metaphysically fundamental fact of the matter about, say, the world as a totality or about freedom” (Ibid., 36). Of course, in the passages quoted above reality is described as relative to specific perspectives. But does that mean, that it makes no sense at all to search for the structure of the universe itself, to ask if we live in a deterministic world or if God really exists? There are text passages in James that suggest otherwise.

James introduces pragmatism as a method only, but in “Pragmatism and Humanism” pragmatism leads to metaphysical pluralism, a hypothesis concerning the structure of the universe itself.

The alternative between Pragmatism and Rationalism, in the shape in which we now have it before us, is no longer a question in the theory of knowledge, it concerns the structure of the universe itself. On the pragmatist side we have only one edition of the universe, unfinished, growing in all sorts of places, especially in the places where thinking beings are at work. On the rationalist side we have a universe in many editions, one real one, the infinite folio, or edition de luxe, eternally complete; and then the various finite editions, full of false readings, distorted and mutilated each in its own way. So the rival metaphysical hypotheses of pluralism and monism here come back upon us. (P, 124)

If one takes this metaphysical pluralism literally, I think it plausible to assume, that James is no longer talking about commonsense-experience, when he equates reality with experience. Rather, he describes a process-ontology based on pure experience. If we read James's radical empiricism as metaphysical at all (which Seigfried for instance does not), it is hardly metaphysical in the Kantian sense, since it is a theory about what reality actually consists of. Regarding the connection between pragmatism und radical empiricism, I think, we have three options: (1) They are incompatible, since pragmatism excludes the possibility for a transcendent metaphysics (cf. Pihlström 2007). (2) Pragmatism is based on the ontology of pure experience (cf. Cooper 2002). (3) It is just a metaphysical speculation that should be examined pragmatically like the others. If James's pragmatism rests upon his metaphysics of pure experience, it is no less metaphysical than the rationalistic alternative. Of course there is no ready-made world, if the world is actually a process. But even if we do not overemphasize the relevance of radical empiricism for pragmatism and simply view it as James's own metaphysical speculation, which is still subjected to pragmatic evaluation, the fact remains, that he is speculating about "*the structure of the universe itself*" (P, 124). In my opinion, James's pragmatism does not prohibit him (or us) from asserting, that the world either is or is not essentially made out of pure experience; it either is or is not totally materialistic; there either is or is no real chance in this universe – even if none of these hypotheses have been verified in an absolute manner so far. Concerning the deterministic or indeterministic structure of the world, James writes in "The Dilemma of Determinism": "The truth *must* lie with one side or the other, and it's lying with one side makes the other false." (WB, 118) At the end of "Rationality, Activity and Faith" James suggests a practical test for verifying if this world is a moral world or a purely materialistic one.

"It cannot then be said that the question Is this a moral world? is a meaningless and unverifiable question because it deals with something non-phenomenal. Any question is full of meaning to which, as here, contrary answers lead to contrary behavior. [...] If this *be* a moral universe, all acts that I make on that assumption, all expectations that I ground on it, will tend more and more completely to interdigitate with the phenomena already existing to match them." (James 1882, 82f.)

Of course, if this happens to be a non-moral world, this too will be revealed to us through our actions and engagements with the world and the experiences they entail. Even if it is not his focus, James never gave up the Peircean idea of an ultimate convergence of experiences, which then constitutes the absolute truth, "meaning what no farther experience will ever alter" (P, 106). Thus, it seems possible that future inquiry and experiences will decide between rival theories or perspectives, either in favor of one of them or by revealing their compatibility. James certainly criticizes metaphysical disputes that have no practical relevance whatsoever and he dismisses the pretense of a philosophy that tries to settle them by theoretical argument alone. But he does, in my opinion, hope that at least some metaphysical problems will get solved in the long run through a more practical and empirical approach. Our final opinion will then entail information about how the structure of our universe *really* is. "Not *being* reality, but only our belief *about* reality, it will contain human elements, but these will *know* the nonhuman element, in the only sense in which there can be knowledge of anything." (P, 120) As pragmatism is fallibilistic our theories may always turn out to be mistaken, but that does not mean, that we are not, in our various perspectives, trying to answer to question, how the world *really* is, in itself though not in all aspects independent of us. According to James, through the adoption of the pragmatic method "[s]cience and metaphysics would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand" (P, 31). That different categorizations into objects might serve different human purposes equally well does not imply that *the* world, the world we experience, has no specific

character at all in itself. Truth, for James, is radically humanized – there is no ultimate truth until we have made it – but facts are not true, “they simply *are*” (P, 108). In James’s pragmatism theories are instruments of adaption to reality rather than exact copies of the world and we probably should not take every postulated entity to literally exist. Still, if one instrument fits better than the other, this does provide us with information about how the world really is. If two out of the three levels of thought specified by James are practically highly effective and usually connected with some sort of realism, it seems to me pragmatically implausible to choose the third one, which actually falls short of any practical merit.

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