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# Tensions in Pragmatism? The Science and Politics of Subjectivity



# Constituents of Pragmatism (1)

I.

Developing a particular philosophical way of understanding and addressing the claims of science.

# Constituents of pragmatism (2)

II.

Pursuing the demand that philosophy be of  
moral and political use

# Constituents of Pragmatism (3)

## III

Emphasizing the significance of human practice  
for philosophical theory

# Constituents of pragmatism (4)

- Naturalism
- Philosophy of life
- The priority of use over truth

# Connections (1)

Quote:

Dewey's naturalism departed substantially from what Edman called the "billiard-ball physics" of the materialists of yore. Naturalism, Edman wrote [in 1937], was "simply a faith in the unity of nature or substance, of which all life is a derivation, upon which all action is posited, and within which the structure of mechanism is seen to be simply a systematized technique of practice and of economical understanding."

Andy Jewett, "canonizing dewey: naturalism, logical empiricism, and the idea of american philosophy," *Modern Intellectual History*, 8, 1 (2011), pp. 91–125

## Connections (2)

*Rorty's progress: from genealogy (of philosophy)...*

- Anti-representationalism applied to philosophy
- Non-reductive physicalism
- Anti-essentialism

# Connections (3)

*Rorty's progress: ...to the political*

- Cultural-political resituation of philosophy
  - **Anti-authoritarianism**
  - **Romantic polytheism**



## Metaphysics as contrast-term in Rortyese

- *Starts out:* as name for a set of (misguided) philosophical convictions
- *Becomes:* name for a strategy of insulating questions from the malleability and contingency of the normative structures of human practice

# **Case: subjectivity (1)**

From Davidsonian Dismissivism  
To Subject Naturalism

## Case: subjectivity (2)

### What's the gain?

- SN encourages engagement with the subjective from a scientific perspective.
- Does not force us into naturalistically motivated but actually retrograde philosophical circumscriptions of the mental as the realm of the propositional
- Most importantly: discharges a debt

## Our Man Huw (1)

### *naturalisms and our debt to science*

The difficult opponent is the naturalist who takes advantage of a non-representationalist theoretical perspective to avoid the material mode altogether. If such an opponent can explain why natural creatures in a natural environment come to talk in these plural ways—of “truth,” “value,” “meaning,” “causation,” and all the rest—what puzzle remains? What debt does philosophy now owe to science? (198)

# OMH (2)

## Expressivist strategy

offers some positive account of the use of the parts of language in question— some account compatible with the basic (“subject naturalist”) premise that the creatures employing the language in question are simply natural creatures, in a natural environment. (9)

“...its naturalistic credentials are not in doubt” (11)

# OMH (4)

## Truth and Method

Truth approached by way of

“explanatory and genealogical approaches”

Which are

“are at least compatible with, if not mandated by, the pragmatist doctrine *that we understand problematic notions in terms of their practical significance.*” (167, my italics)

# OMH (3)

## Against metaphysics?

Metaphysics as a philosophical mistake; a misunderstanding of science:

- of what science tells us
- Of what it requires

# Consequences of Pragmatism (1)

OMH (A very friendly guy)

But wait, you metaphysicians,  
I will accommodate you(r  
representationalist intuitions).



# Consequences of Pragmatism (2)

Rorty (a very harsh man):

Change your stance,  
or you  
shall perish (from irrelevance)

## Consequences of Pragmatism (3)

Can expressivism be revisionistic of ordinary human practices?

Yeeees, *but*.....

Where *is* the cultural-political agenda?

In the passenger seat?

In the back seat?

In the boot?

On the sidewalk?

P.S.

. . .and here there may also be some things to say about historicism....