

INTRODUCING PRAGMATISM

Chris Horner

Chris Horner opens our debate on pragmatism with this handy introduction to the subject. Those entirely new to the topic of pragmatism might also find helpful Stephen Law's article 'Is it all relative?' (see issue 2 of Think).

Pragmatism is an important contribution to philosophy, with its roots in the work of three American thinkers of the late 19th/early 20th century: C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey. Set against the long history of western philosophy, this makes it a relatively recent phenomenon, although like most things that seem new in philosophy, it has many continuities with what went before. Recent it may be, but it already constitutes a kind of tradition, with competing camps, radicals, apostates and reformers. Two leading contemporary figures in that tradition are Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, philosophers who, as we shall see, have major disagreements on many issues. Because pragmatists themselves disagree on all sorts of things, it is impossible to give a straight, neutral account of 'what pragmatists all believe'. So in what follows I shall start with what I think would get a good deal of assent, and then move to consider some of the work of Rorty and Putnam.

Mirrors versus tools

What is the value of an idea, or a belief? Many people would be inclined to say that it lies in its truth, its faithfulness to the way things are. To have a true belief is thus to get an accurate picture of reality. To be 'objective' is to reflect on the way things are, independently of the wants and needs of the person who does the reflecting. The aspiration to achieve this has been shared by philosophers, scientists and saints. The methods may vary and the answers may differ dramatically, but the goal has been the same: to see the Truth, to know Reality-As-It-Is-In-Itself. Pragmatism offers a decisive break with this tradition.

For pragmatists, ideas are the means that allow us to do things, and the success of an idea is measured by its practical effectiveness, not by its faithfulness as a reflection of reality. Ideas are tools, not mirrors. They therefore reject the traditional model of truth and knowledge as deeply misleading. For the traditional model, a belief is true if it corresponds to reality: this is why it is usually called the 'correspondence theory of truth'. It seems to have common sense on its side: after all, what could the truth of a sentence consist in if not correspondence to some independent reality, some way the world is in itself? But pragmatists (and others) have pointed out that there are serious difficulties with such an approach. Let's reconsider it. The correspondence theory goes something like this: on one side there is (A) human thought (beliefs, ideas, sentences, propositions), and on the other (B) the way things are. Truth amounts to getting (A) to accurately mirror (B). But this is an oddly 'sideways on' model. It supposes we can imagine what B is like, *apart from A*. But to do that we would have to grasp reality plain, independent of human concepts and beliefs, and that is something that no one can do. For the model to work, we have to imagine standing *outside* of (A) and (B) in order to imagine them lining up. But the demand that we do this does not make any sense — it is unintelligible. No one can stand 'outside' of 'merely human' concepts to think about Reality, as concepts are what we think with. And if we still insist on the correspondence model of truth we then become vulnerable to doubts about our attempt to mirror the Way Things Are In Themselves. Does appearance correspond to reality? Our knowledge claims become the targets of the sceptic.

Rortian pragmatism

Pragmatists urge us to ditch the correspondence theory of truth. They divide on what should go in its place. Richard Rorty's view is that, since there is no way that things 'really are', we should drop the appearance/reality distinction and instead ask which of our descriptions are more or less useful for our purposes. Ideas are like tools that help us to get what we want. This does not mean something like 'truth is

whatever I say that it is'. What we call a 'fact' or a 'truth' cannot be considered in isolation from the larger fabric of beliefs into which it is stitched. Suppose I claim that I have just flown across London by flapping my arms. You are unlikely accept this because of all the other things you believe about people, objects, physics, etc. I will find it difficult to convince you as there seems no way in which the idea of unaided flight by a forty-something philosophy teacher is going to connect with those other beliefs. If you do choose to believe me, you are going to have to do a pretty drastic rethink of everything else you think you know. On the other hand, the view that I have just made it all up *can* be stitched into your web of beliefs, via terms like 'drunk', 'mad', 'joking' or 'doing a thought experiment in philosophy'. Claims have to win a game of justification to be accepted, and to do that they have to cohere with other beliefs. They then earn their keep by being of some use to us. So in science, for instance, a given theory like that of Darwin's, overcomes its rivals by convincing the scientists that it makes the best connection with everything else that they know, not by being connected to some Reality lying outside language altogether. It then pays its way through the use we are able to make of it. Science is just a human project for controlling and predicting nature, not achieving One True Description. The success of a theory will be how it contributes to that project, not how it mirrors non-human reality.

The Rortian point is that Truth with a capital 'T' cannot be invoked as an external validation for our descriptions. We should instead see it as a 'compliment' we pay to an idea or a belief of which we approve. Since we cannot go beyond mere agreement with other members of our community to 'reality as it is in itself', we should replace the search for objectivity with the goal of solidarity with our community. The criteria for approving one idea rather than another will depend partly on what kind of vocabulary we are using. Science, poetry, religion etc. will have different internal standards and rules: scientific theories are subject to different criteria to those of literary criticism. Sometimes different accounts correspond to such different human purposes that no clash need occur,

even when they seem to concern the same things. The poet's and the scientist's description of a field of daffodils use different vocabularies, for different ends. The poet's golden host of daffs is not undercut by a truer language of photosynthesis and osmosis. Neither of these vocabularies should be viewed as 'truer' description of the daffodils because there is no single true account of what daffodils are. There are only different ways of describing daffodils and everything else in our world. Philosophy too is just another way of describing for particular purposes, and thus it has no reason to imagine itself as superior to literature or science when it comes to helping us lead better lives.

Sometimes clashes are unavoidable, in politics, for instance. One wants to live in a democracy that respects human rights; someone else thinks that a more authoritarian regime would be preferable. What can the pragmatic democrat do? Here it will be a case of making a claim, not about which set of institutions corresponds to the deep truth of human nature, but about which kind of institutions we would like to live with when we have the choice. So politics will be about trying to convince people that they ought to prefer some ways of living with people rather than others. This will involve deploying arguments, trying to persuade people that they would prefer a democratic vision over the authoritarian one, as well as trying to get them to *imagine* what the alternatives would mean for them and for other people. But no political arrangements correspond to the one right way that we were meant to live.

Is this relativism? Rorty claims that it is not. He argues that he is ethnocentric — that he, like everyone else, makes judgments about what is good or true from within a given culture. This does not debar him from condemning or praising things or people using the criteria that he shares with others in his community. So Rorty commends liberalism as a good thing self-consciously as a *liberal*: there is no way that liberalism can be picked out as the best approach compared to any other by some judge standing outside of values altogether. He is a 'liberal ironist', passionately affirming the values of free speech and tolerance while realising that he has no warrant for this

outside his own liberalism. As a pragmatist, the best thing he can say is that liberalism is something that works well in giving many people the kinds of lives they tend to want.

Criticising Rorty

Rortian pragmatism has attracted plenty of criticism. What, some critics have asked, are we to make of the claim that objectivity amounts to nothing more than solidarity with a community? Suppose we abandon objectivity as something like 'true independently of what people believe' and substitute 'solidarity with other members of my community'. What would be the status of the claim 'there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq'? or 'racial discrimination is unjust'? When someone makes these sorts of claims, they surely imagine that they are saying something that is categorically right or wrong, whatever other people in a community may believe. A Rortian pragmatist might respond by pointing out that whatever the speaker might imagine they are doing, all 'true' or 'objective' or 'just' really means is 'passes the tests my community has for justifying a belief or preferring way of life'. We can go on using 'true' and 'objective' and 'unjust' when we make claims about WMD or racism, but when we reflect on the ultimate status of those claims we see that 'truth' and 'justice' belong inside the language of a given community; they don't point at some extra linguistic reality. Unsurprisingly, many of Rorty's critics have found it impossible to accept this line of argument. One who does not go along with it is the philosopher who is often viewed as the other leading contemporary pragmatist (or 'neo-pragmatist'): Hilary Putnam.

Putnam on truth

Hilary Putnam has a somewhat equivocal attitude to being labeled a 'pragmatist', but as he acknowledges himself, his work certainly is in the spirit of thinkers like James and Dewey. Some of what Putnam argues for has its similarities with the view we have been examining, but there are important differences, too. In a recognisably pragmatist spirit Putnam rejects what I have called the 'mirror' or correspondence theory of

truth, but this has not led him to abandon the notion that our ideas are somehow answerable to the way things are, apart from what a community might agree is the case. He has been particularly concerned to resist the idea that science, and physics in particular, can provide a final description corresponding to the way reality is 'in itself'. Putnam argues that the idea that we can aspire to an 'absolute conception of the world', distinct from human concepts, values and needs is deeply misleading.

One reason for calling it misleading is that all experience involves concepts. We do not just observe (or feel) sensations like 'blue', 'hot', or 'pain': we have concepts which, as language users, we cannot do without if we are to have anything recognisable as a human experience. These concepts are always related to the purposes that we have. Different purposes will call forth different concepts. Imagine that a physicist and a layperson are both looking at the same table. Ask them both what is 'really there' and you could get quite different answers: the lay person (me, for instance) might tell you that the table is solid, or mostly solid. Now if we ask the physicist we may get a very different account: the table is mostly empty space, as the atoms that make up the table contain huge spaces between their particles in relation to the radius of the electron or the nucleus of the atoms. Which account is the more true? Neither of them, according to Putnam, as both serve different purposes and therefore use different concepts. The two accounts operate at different levels; one cannot be reduced to the other. The layperson's account of the table is not somehow an illusion that the scientist has seen through (or beneath?). The tendency to think that the scientific account is a kind of master description revealing what is really there must be resisted as a symptom of the scientism of our modern culture. There is no escaping the humanness of all our descriptions.

Another reason for rejecting the aspiration to an 'absolute conception of the world' is its tendency to perpetuate a deep division between 'facts' and values'. According to this view, facts are supposed to be just what is 'out there' while values are just what we want, or find precious. Descriptive language is

thus reserved for the former ('Iraq has oil reserves') while values concern just what we humans want, or prize ('we ought to treat prisoners with humanity'). But as Putnam remarks, values cannot be separated from fact in this manner. Science itself is value-laden. All of the following are saturated by 'normative' (i.e. value) considerations: (1) that scientists be accurate, truthful, and scrupulous; (2) that theories should be selected on grounds of their elegance, simplicity, and economy; (3) that one project rather than another should be pursued and funded; and (4) that we should engage in an enterprise called science in the first place. Moreover, the project of science is part of a larger thing that we are all concerned with: *human flourishing*. And just as science cannot escape values, so morality, for Putnam, is embedded in our understanding our world and of ourselves. To understand someone, for instance, we need to be able to see what they are like. So an adequate account of a person will use the best relevant concepts: for example words like 'generous', 'friendly' and 'honest' (or their opposites). These terms cannot be pigeonholed as either 'factual' or 'evaluative'. They may be more or less accurate (if they are accurate they will help us make predictions about likely behaviour), but they also imply moral judgements. And they cannot be reduced without loss to the language of physics, of objects moving in space. People are rather different to billiard balls.

Rorty's metaphysical rebound

Note that in all of this there is no Rortian talk of objectivity being reduced to agreement or 'solidarity'. Putnam wants to refute what he calls 'metaphysical realism' (the belief in the possibility of One True Description of Reality As It Is In Itself), and he argues for the unbreakable connections between of human purposes, concepts and knowledge. But he does believe that experience must be answerable to a reality that is more than the agreement of a community. Rorty, according to Putnam, was right to reject the correspondence theory of truth, but wrong to then conclude that we cannot describe reality. Putnam's point is that once we see that it is unintelligible to say

(1) 'we sometimes describe reality as it is in itself' we should not then say (2) 'we cannot describe reality as it is in itself'. There is no sense to the idea of a 'reality as it is in itself' and so if we can't make sense of (1) then (2) doesn't make any sense either. But the term 'reality' still has a use. Either 'there are no WMD in Iraq' is true or it isn't, whatever the people in a community may believe. We use language, concepts, in many different ways to do many different things, including saying what we think is true. Rorty's problem is that he is on the rebound from metaphysical realism and this has led him to embrace a position that only looks like an insight.

Both philosophers invoke the 'fathers' of the pragmatist movement in philosophy, and both embrace the view that ideas are like tools rather than mirrors of a (separable) reality. They then take these insights in different directions. Their differences on how we should, or if we should, talk of 'describing reality' mark a real disagreement about how we should view knowledge and truth. It is a disagreement that has implications for political theory and ethics, as well as epistemology and the philosophy of mind. The debate among those broadly in the pragmatist tradition, as well as the one between pragmatists and their opponents, is lively, influential and fascinating. And it is going to be with us for the foreseeable future.

Chris Horner is co-author (with Emrys Westacott) of Thinking Through Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).