

## **“Contemporary Pragmatism: Symposia on Putnam, Rescher and Rorty,” by Troy Deters**

The forthcoming essay will plan to review the following volumes of the journal *Contemporary Pragmatism*: (i) *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006), Symposium on Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*; (ii) *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 2, Number 2 (December 2005), Symposium on Nicholas Rescher; and (iii) *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 2, Number 1 (June 2005), Symposium on Richard Rorty. Particularly, I will examine these volumes as they relate to Hilary Putnam, Nicholas Rescher, and Richard Rorty. Most of the essays in these volumes, I will illustrate, rely on certain Deweyan themes, such as his notion of community, his notion of truth, and his notion of the qualitative, to illustrate certain points on these authors.

Hilary Putnam maintains a “pluralistic” stance that also occurs in classical pragmatists, such as James and Dewey.<sup>5</sup> Like Dewey’s and James’ pragmatism, Putnam holds that descriptions are not a feature of the world but instead take place from the standpoint of humans. As Philström maintains in the following way: “This is a version of the pluralism one finds in pragmatists like James and Dewey.”<sup>6</sup> Like James, Putnam endorses a pluralism that rejects the view that there is a single all-embracing world view.<sup>7</sup> He accepts the thesis that there are multiple realities that account for and explain the world. Following the style of James, Putnam argues, according to Philström, that metaphysical truths are interdependent with ethical ones. As Philström explains in the following passage: “as Classical pragmatists (particularly James) argued, our ethical needs may legitimately influence our metaphysical commitments.”<sup>8</sup> Metaphysics, for Putnam, like James, is intricately connected to ethics.”<sup>9</sup>

Philström holds that Putnam’s book is one that typifies pragmatism. Putnam maintains that values, either moral or aesthetic, are important for the establishment of a pragmatic stance.<sup>10</sup> As Philström argues, “values *are* a crucial aspect of the human reality (transcendentally) investigated in such a pragmatist ontology.”<sup>11</sup>

In Chapter II, Joseph Margolis explains that Putnam viewed truth as it not being composed of a single all-encompassing principle. As Margolis explains in this passage, “Putnam backs away from actually affirming the necessity of there being an ideal regulative principle of truth: he speaks of it in terms that seem to favor a rational ‘hope’

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<sup>5</sup> Sami Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 3.

<sup>6</sup> Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology,” 3.

<sup>7</sup> Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology,” 5.

<sup>8</sup> Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology,” 6.

<sup>9</sup> Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology,” 6.

<sup>10</sup> Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology,” 8.

<sup>11</sup> Philström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology,” 8.

(much as Peirce did and for related reasons.”<sup>12</sup> He has an ethics that is based upon a “universal moral morality.”<sup>13</sup> Also, Mark Timmons, in another essay, provides an account of Putnam’s characterization of ethical relativism such that Putnam’s characterization of the objectivity of methodology is one that can be seen in certain accounts of ethical constructivism.<sup>14</sup> Timmons explains this in the following text: “As I am using this term, an ethical constructivist holds that there are ethical facts (and associated truths), but such facts and truths are constituted by actual or ideal human attitudes, conventions, and the like – call them ‘stances’.”<sup>15</sup>

David Copp claims that Putnam holds a moral realist stance. According to Copp, moral realism is a view about the moral claims that we make in life. According to moral realism our beliefs are either truth or false. Furthermore, some of these beliefs will always turn out to be true.<sup>16</sup> Copp argues that Putnam has the stance of a moral realist. Putnam appears to be an anti-realist. Putnam appears to say that numbers are non-existent entities. This, among many other claims, contribute to Putnam’s stance. He takes the stance that the truths of mathematics are not contingent upon the existence of outside objects. Putnam’s views on ethical truths parallel his views on mathematical truths. He holds that ethical standards. They take place not as absolute descriptions of the objects they describe but as conventions set forth.<sup>17</sup>

Putnam, in his response to several commentators of his works, puts forth certain views and defends some of his positions. Some of these authors he is responding to include Sami Philström, Joseph Margolis, Mark Timmons, David Copp, and Claudine Tiercelin.<sup>18</sup> In another essay in this volume, Scott R. Stroud discusses whether or not Dewey’s ethics can be used as constructed from Dewey’s account of how they acquire knowledge of their current context (or, moral criticism).<sup>19</sup>

Hugh G. McDonald draws a distinction between the subjective and the objective. Creativity falls into neither of these categories. Values, McDonald argues, are subjective and existences are objective. Creativity functions to change the world into different manifestations. Imagination, as concerned with the mind, serves as a source of our

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Margolis, “Hilary Putnam and the Promise of Pluralism” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Margolis, “Hilary Putnam and the Promise of Pluralism,” 18.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Timmons “Ethical Objectivity Humanly Speaking: Reflections on Putnam’s *Ethics without Ontology*” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 31.

<sup>15</sup> Timmons, “Ethical Objectivity Humanly Speaking,” 31.

<sup>16</sup> David Copp, “The Ontology of Putnam’s *Ethics Without Ontology*” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 40.

<sup>17</sup> Copp, “The Ontology of Putnam’s *Ethics Without Ontology*,” 48.

<sup>18</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Replies to Commentators” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 69-94.

<sup>19</sup> Scott R. Stroud, “Constructing a Deweyan Theory of Moral Cultivation,” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 107.

thoughts. Creativity functions in this way whenever an event takes place. As McDonald explains in the following passage: “Creativity is an important and basic element of all activities, personal and impersonal.”<sup>20</sup> When creative actualization takes place, it “includes a discovery of the novel.”<sup>21</sup>

He discusses in detail the nature of meaning. The meaning of life, McDonald writes, takes place as a process of undergoing that has meaning. The meaning is acquired by this very process. McDonald is in a search for a test of value. With respect to values, McDonald writes the following: “values mediate means and ends, harmonize the possible and actual, imagination and action.”<sup>22</sup>

Robert Lane argues that synechism, for Peirce, was thought of as “not simply as a doctrine of metaphysics, but as a regulative principle of inquiry.”<sup>23</sup> Lane also uses the notion of “seconds” to describe his position. In doing this, he introduces the notion of universal categories, of which Peirce describes three: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.<sup>24</sup>

Lane uses Peirce’s notion of continuity to illustrate that human development takes place. As Lane writes as follows: “at first glance, the Peircean themes of continuity and individuality seem to pull in different directions. My claim that human development is continuous strongly suggests that a human being is himself or herself a continuum in some important sense.”<sup>25</sup> Lane argues that Peirce’s views on identity are such that they the characteristics of their identities do not change. As Lane writes in the following passage: “Peirce’s view seems to have been that it matters little how much an individual’s qualities (its ‘Firsts’) change; an individual retains its identity through time when its ‘oppositions to other things’, i.e., its reactions against other things, are continuous.”<sup>26</sup> Lane wants to account for the fact that distinct identities take place with a sense of continuity.<sup>27</sup>

Next, Lane is concerned with showing how it is that a pragmatic approach to the notion of pre-birth humans can lead to successful results. He discusses diachronic identity. This holds that an entity, call it  $t$ , can change in its identity from  $t$  to  $t_1$ .<sup>28</sup> In doing so, it still preserves the same state of existence. Peirce discussed the notion of

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<sup>20</sup> Hugh G. McDonald “Creative Actualization: A Pluralist Theory of Value” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 126.

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, “Creative Actualization,” 126.

<sup>22</sup> McDonald, “Creative Actualization,” 139.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Lane, “Synechistic Bioethics: A Peircean View of the Moral Status of Pre-Birth Humans” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 3, Number 2 (December 2006): 153.

<sup>24</sup> Lane, “Synechistic Bioethics,” 155.

<sup>25</sup> Lane, “Synechistic Bioethics,” 156.

<sup>26</sup> Lane, “Synechistic Bioethics,” 159.

<sup>27</sup> Lane, “Synechistic Bioethics,” 159.

<sup>28</sup> Lane, “Synechistic Bioethics,” 160.

indeterminacy. Peirce describes a true belief as one that would survive all views on truth and falsity. True propositions are ones that would be accepted (taken as an object of thought) and a false proposition is one which would be rejected (as an object of thought) at the end of inquiry.<sup>29</sup> Lane argues that as a result of the fact that some propositions are neither true nor false that the world as it exists can take an indeterminate form. In "Synechistic Bioethics: A Peircean View of the Moral Status of Pre-Birth Humans" Lane explains this in the following way: "Peirce's pragmatism about truth and reality, when paired with his acknowledgement of propositions which are neither true nor false, implies that there are ways in which the world - not just our descriptions of the world, but the world itself - is indeterminate."<sup>30</sup>

The Symposium on Nicholas Rescher presents many different articles written by numerous well-respected scholars. Richard Gale discusses Rescher's cognitive pragmatism. Larry Hickman discusses Rescher's pragmatism, showing how it is that his pragmatism reflects and is similar to those developed by Peirce, James and Dewey.<sup>31</sup> In an interview with Charles A. Hobbes, entitled "Unabridged *Kinesis* Review," Hickman argues that Rescher's pragmatism is more like that of Dewey's instrumentalism, or his theory of inquiry.<sup>32</sup> Dewey accounts for truth as warranted assertibility, or, a justified judgment that results from inquiry. Hickman views him more as a philosopher who holds that he approximates truth. The latter view is a trans-horizontal view of truth.<sup>33</sup>

Mitchell Aboulafia discusses Nancy Fraser's moral philosophy. In addition, Frank X Ryan discusses the views of phenomenology of Robert E. Ennis and his views on consciousness. This book discusses many different philosophers' views on the pragmatism of Rescher, as well as presenting a few unique articles that do not treat Rescher's works.

The final volume I will consider is one on Richard Rorty. Kai Nielsen argues that Richard Rorty is seen different from person to person. Some people have deep convictions in his beliefs while others do not. In this chapter, Nielsen's goal is to discuss many aspects of Rorty's philosophy. In this essay, Nielsen is out to set praise on some of Rorty's work. He discusses Rorty's position on pragmatism, which, Nielsen claims, is anti-representationalist.<sup>34</sup> The notion of representation, as a way of getting to know individuals, is stressed. As Nielsen phrases this in the following text, "It can do this in studying persons as knowers of the activity of representation."<sup>35</sup> He adds further to his conviction with respect to Rorty being an anti-representationist that, "anti-

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<sup>29</sup> Lane, "Synechistic Bioethics," 160.

<sup>30</sup> Lane, "Synechistic Bioethics," 161.

<sup>31</sup> Larry A. Hickman, "What Sort of Pragmatist is Nicholas Rescher?" in *Contemporary Pragmatism* Volume 2, Number 2 (December 2005): 9-11.

<sup>32</sup> Hickman, "What Sort of Pragmatist is Nicholas Rescher?," 9.

<sup>33</sup> Hickman, "What Sort of Pragmatist is Nicholas Rescher?," 12.

<sup>34</sup> Kai Nielsen, "Pragmatism as Atheoreticism: Richard Rorty" in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, Volume II, Number I (June 2005): 4.

<sup>35</sup> Nielsen, "Pragmatism as Atheoreticism," 4.

representationalists reject the very idea that beliefs can represent reality; they are neither realists nor anti-realists.”<sup>36</sup>

Nielsen argues that Rorty is Darwinian in nature. Rorty is also a fallibilist in nature.<sup>37</sup> Part of his task is to explain some of Rorty’s philosophical commitments. Nielsen argues that Dewey had a profound influence on Rorty throughout his life. In this essay, Nielsen details some of these. Some of these include his moral philosophy, social and political philosophy, and others. He compares Dewey’s Darwinian stance to Rorty’s. Finally, he considers some of the debates that took place between Rorty and Richard J. Bernstein on certain political issues.<sup>38</sup>

The next essay in this book is entitled, “Foucault and Rorty on Truth and Ideology: A Pragmatist View from the Left.” This essay deals with the works of Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Karl Marx. This essay deals with issues such as representationalism and anti-representationalism. His intention is to argue that one “can be a thoroughly anti-representationalist as a Richard Rorty or a Michel Foucault and yet, contrary to both, still reasonably cling to a critical sense of ‘ideology’, a sense in which to be under the sway of ideology is, in part, to be under the spell of a specific kind of delusion or illusion.”<sup>39</sup> This work relies on Engels and Dewey, among others, to illustrate certain points. It treats in detail Foucault’s and Rorty’s theories of truth and how it relates to their ideology.

Two other essays in this volume that treats Rorty include, “Pragmatism, Truth, and Inquiry” by Chase B. Wrenn and “On the Idea of Philosophy as *Bildungsroman*: Rorty and His Critics” by Christopher Voprail. The former provides an analysis of Rorty’s views on truth. Wrenn relies on Dewey’s and Peirce’s works to make certain points about Rorty’s minimalist stance. In the latter, Christopher Voprail argues that Rorty’s work can be seen as a *Bildungsroman*. A *Bildungsroman* refers to a type of literary essay that is seen in the works of Goethe. It is a type of “novel of education.”<sup>40</sup> The novel centers around a character who is undergoing the innocence of youth and proceeds to trace the moral and psychological progression of them to a later age of self-formation and self-knowledge filled with growth. As Voprail phrases this, “such novels trace the moral, psychological, and social development of a young character who journeys from youthful provinciality and innocence to a more complex social and personal maturity borne of conflict, growth, and, above all, new found self-knowledge.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nielsen, “Pragmatism as Atheoreticism,” 7.

<sup>37</sup> Nielsen, “Pragmatism as Atheoreticism,” 10.

<sup>38</sup> Nielsen, “Pragmatism as Atheoreticism,” 23-30.

<sup>39</sup> Chandra Kumar, “Foucault and Rorty on Truth and Ideology: A Pragmatist View from the Left” in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, Volume II, Number I (June 2005): 40.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Voprail, “On the Idea of Philosophy as *Bildungsroman*: Rorty and His Critics” in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, Volume II, Number I (June 2005): 122.

<sup>41</sup> Voprail, “On the Idea of Philosophy as *Bildungsroman*,” 122.

The last few essays in this volume treat the works of C. S. Peirce as well as Umberto Eco. Furthermore, it contains reviews by such people as Mary Magada-Ward and Jacoby Carter.

These volumes illustrate certain themes that can be seen in the pragmatist tradition. Particularly, it is important to see the influence of John Dewey on numerous thinkers in these essays and how Dewey has had an influence on such people as Hilary Putnam, Nicholas Rescher, and Richard Rorty. Dewey is an important figure in contemporary philosophy, and I hope to have shown that Dewey's relation to pragmatism is prevalent throughout.

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