

Reviews

PHILIP KITCHER

Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy

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Reading Philip Kitcher's new collection *Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy*, one can't help but think "well, we're all pragmatists now." Indeed, the list of prominent philosophers who've embraced some form of pragmatism seems to grow longer every year. This list includes not only 20th century greats such as Quine and Rorty (among others), but also living philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, Robert Brandom, Jürgen Habermas, Simon Blackburn, and Huw Price, to name just a few. With this collection of papers Kitcher places himself firmly in the pragmatist camp.

Sometimes "pragmatism" is used in ways that are at best vacuous and at worst misleading; and, of course, pragmatism comes in many different flavors and strengths. The danger of dilution makes Kitcher's collection all the more notable. In this set of 17 essays—most written in the last five years, most but not all reprinted from other sources—Kitcher does two noteworthy things: first, he clearly articulates a robust theoretical position, which he calls "pragmatic naturalism" and, second, he gives sensitive and thoughtful readings of classical American pragmatists (particularly Dewey, whom he calls "the most important philosopher of the twentieth century" (211), but also James).

Kitcher made his reputation for work in the philosophy of science and philosophy of biology. His earliest writings critiqued sociobiology and creationism; later work aimed to give a clear-eyed account of how science could be a rational, objective enterprise, notwithstanding the cultural critiques of the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, he has argued for how science can play a responsible role in democratic societies—and, conversely, how democracy can play a responsible role in guiding scientific inquiry. With this more recent work (from approximately *Science, Truth and Democracy* (2003) onward) there is a clear connection to Dewey and *his* focus on the relation between science, democracy, and philosophy.

In defending a “pragmatic naturalism” Kitcher makes several specific commitments. He is committed, first of all, to what he calls “real realism”: a “piecemeal” and “modest” approach “that grants a license to take seriously the claims of the most successful sciences at face value” (128). Rejecting anti-realism and constructivism, Kitcher defends the “natural epistemological attitude” (72) which holds that in fact we *do* spend a lot of time actually representing the world around us and that these representations *can* be more or less accurate. Second, he is committed to a “modest correspondence theory of truth” that, while entailing an objective reference relation between our words and the mind-independent reality they refer to, does *not* “suppose there are entities, facts, to which true sentences correspond” (111). Kitcher argues that a modest correspondence theory is necessary to explain why we act as we do, especially when engaged in real-life inquiries that are more complex than the typical set pieces used in philosophical writing. Third, Kitcher is committed to a kind of naturalism, particularly a kind of epistemological naturalism, that blurs the distinction between philosophy and science so that science can provide support for philosophical theories as well as be an example of how successful inquiry is organized.

Finally, Kitcher is committed to pragmatism in at least two senses. First, pragmatism is anti-metaphysical:

It eschews any grand metaphysical premises in favor of a return to the everyday experiences of ordinary people: in the spirit of James and Dewey, it attempts not to substitute a new, improved metaphysics for a faulty one, but to strip away the metaphysical trappings that impede a satisfactory appraisal of inquiry. (xxi)

Second, pragmatism provides an account of “the epistemic good” that is the goal of inquiry. Kitcher credits pragmatists with grounding “the epistemic good” in the *common* good and, given how the common good evolves and changes over time, this means that:

There are many different ways to identify the boundaries of objects and their divisions into kinds, and that these should appropriately evolve in the course of inquiry, so as to facilitate achieving the kinds of knowledge that have become most important to people. (xx)

Pragmatism thus becomes a way of ensuring that our philosophical theories are connected to real-life concerns.

As a result, *Preludes to Pragmatism* also contains several essays where Kitcher practices what he preaches. These include essays such as “The Importance of Dewey for Philosophy (and for Much Else Besides)” and “Philosophy Inside Out” where Kitcher warns that much contemporary

philosophy is in danger of becoming, to quote Dewey, “a sentimental indulgence for a few.” There are also several essays where Kitcher applies his pragmatic naturalism to practical concerns. For example, in “Does ‘Race’ Have a Future?” he argues that the notion of race isn’t as scientifically suspect as many assume: not only is race analogous to other categorizations that biologists use without controversy, but the concept of race comes in useful when studying how humans have migrated over the millennia, or when understanding why some populations have the health problems they do. Having said that, Kitcher is well aware that the concept of race has been abused in the past; as a result, he argues that the value of this concept must be weighed against its costs and this means that scientific inquiry must be receptive to democratic, participatory influences. He writes:

The fact that notions of race have surfaced both in scientific inquiry and in socially consequential debates means that the continued viability of these notions should not be decided by any group of academic researchers. . . . *If there are any groups whose voices should be heard in rendering the verdict the pragmatic test demands, then they should be those who have suffered most from the past employment of the categories.* (164–5, emphasis added)

In other words (to use Kitcher’s earlier language) we need to recognize the complex relationship between epistemic goods and common goods: a crucial pragmatic insight.

Kitcher takes a similarly measured approach with regard to contemporary debates over religious belief and atheism. Drawing on James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Dewey’s *A Common Faith*, he argues that contemporary “militant” or “Darwinian” atheists—he has Dawkins and Dennett in mind—gloss over the complex grounds for people’s religious “orientations.” As a result, their arguments have almost no chance of actually changing anyone’s mind (though Dawkins and Dennett do “sing beautifully to the choir” (265)). As Kitcher puts it, if secular humanism is nothing more than a “blunt denial” (287) of religious belief, then it’s hard to see how it can ever be a viable alternative for someone who already has a religious orientation. Following Dewey, then, atheists and secular humanists must make a *positive* case for their position and show how it is possible to still have the sorts of “epiphanies” that give life meaning and inspire common endeavors.

Several essays take up a related issue: where then does ethics fit within a framework that is resolutely naturalist, anti-metaphysical, and secular? In other words, can a pragmatic naturalism account for distinctively ethical experiences such as altruism or the sense that ethical progress is possible? Once again Kitcher takes several cues from Dewey and his claim, in his 1932 *Ethics*, that ethical principles emerge through

both complex and not-so-complex social interactions. Drawing on the philosophy of biology and evolutionary theory, Kitcher aims to work out the details of Dewey's proposal, showing how ethics can have a natural, evolutionary origin, while still possessing normative authority. (These themes are developed in more detail in his book *The Ethical Project* (2011).)

So, in *Preludes to Pragmatism* Kitcher defends "pragmatic naturalism," warns against philosophy becoming a "sentimental" old-boy's club, and applies his pragmatic naturalism to several specific questions at the intersection of science, religion, philosophy, and politics. What to make, then, of this wide-ranging collection?

First, it is worth noting a clever sleight-of-hand in how Kitcher describes his position. For someone proposing the reconstruction of philosophy, his commitments at first sound reassuringly old-school: for example, he is both a realist (not only that, but a *real* realist!) and he endorses a correspondence theory of truth. But it's not clear whether other realists or defenders of correspondence would find his versions at all acceptable. After all, Kitcher rejects the notion of natural kinds (which many realists take on board) and he sees no reason to ground a correspondence theory in anything like "facts." In fact, he sounds a lot like James or Dewey. When pressed, they too would both say that, *of course*, pragmatists are realists and *of course* truth involves some kind of correspondence—but of course only if these terms are stripped of all their metaphysical baggage.¹ Perhaps this is clever marketing to make his proposals go down easier.

But there's more to it than just clever marketing. Kitcher's title, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, is a conscious reference to Rorty's 1982 *Consequences of Pragmatism*. To begin with, Kitcher claims to share Rorty's "radical" reading of pragmatism (and I have no reason to doubt him). On their radical reading, the point is *not* to make pragmatism respectable by assimilating it to contemporary analytic philosophy (Kitcher claims that this is what Putnam and Brandom do); rather, the point is to show how pragmatism offers quite a serious challenge to philosophy-as-usual. This helps account for the sleight-of-hand just mentioned.

At the same time Kitcher's version of pragmatism is significantly different from Rorty's: Rorty's pragmatism is skeptical about science, naturalism, and representationalism, flirts with relativism, and leaves the future of philosophy unclear. Kitcher's pragmatism embraces science, naturalism and representationalism. It is scientifically literate in ways that Rorty's pragmatism simply isn't: there's no suggestion that science is merely one way of speaking among many and, while Kitcher avoids a simplistic scientism, he's also sure that science *is* often the best way of finding out about the world. As a result, while Rorty did a lot to bring pragmatism back into the conversation (even his detractors will

admit this), Kitcher does more to sketch out a progressive philosophical program that has pragmatism firmly at its center.

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NOTE

1. A neat discussion of James' realism can be found in Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, "What the spilled beans can spell: The difficult and deep realism of William James." *Times Literary Supplement* 21 June 1996, 14–15. Dewey was fond of speaking of correspondence "in the operational sense" in the same way that a key corresponds to a lock (see, e.g., LW 14:179).