

# Neopragmatism and Theological Reason

G.W. KIMURA

*Alaska Humanities Forum, USA*

ASHGATE

# Contents

## **Part I**

Introduction: Neopragmatism in Crisis	3
1 Emerson, Part I	15
2 Emerson, Part II	25
3 Peirce	37
4 James	53
5 Dewey	69

## **Part II**

6 Early Neopragmatism	85
7 Neokantianism and Neopragmatism	101
8 Literary Neopragmatism	115
9 Neopragmatism and the Return of Religion	129
10 Conclusion – Neopragmatism and Theology	145
<i>Index</i>	<i>161</i>

# Introduction

## Neopragmatism in Crisis

Neopragmatism faces a dilemma. This dilemma is of its own making, the result of its rapid success in the world of ideas. It is an unintended consequence created by its own enthusiasts that now threatens the pragmatic revival from the inside. This dilemma is the internal coherence, or lack thereof, of neopragmatist philosophy. This predicament is especially acute in epistemology, going to the heart of neopragmatism's self-sufficiency as a theory of knowledge.

Of course, such accusations are nothing new. In its earliest forms, both empiricist and rationalist critics derided classical pragmatism as pseudo-philosophy for its lack of systematisation. Today, however, leading neopragmatists – Cornel West and Richard Rorty to name two – make the case, instead of the opponents. They gleefully characterise pragmatism as an ‘American evasion of philosophy’<sup>1</sup> and ‘cultural criticism’,<sup>2</sup> respectively, rather than epistemology. Rorty even fashions his version of neopragmatism as parallel to deconstructionism, casting himself as the North American equivalent to ‘[Jacques] Derrida...the most intriguing and ingenious of contemporary’ thinkers.<sup>3</sup>

Compare such anti-philosophical, anti-realist characterisations with two other leading neopragmatists: Nicholas Rescher and Hilary Putnam. Rescher states ‘[p]ragmatism takes the traditionalistic line of seeing the purposive character of the philosophical enterprise to lie in its very nature as a venture in seeking to answer our larger questions in a systematic way.’ Neopragmatism for Rescher is not just traditionally philosophical, it is also epistemologically ‘objective’. It involves ‘metaphysical realism’ of specific neoKantian construction, the polar opposite of Rorty and West.<sup>4</sup> Putnam’s neopragmatist epistemology, likewise, is ‘realism’, although he has evolved from ‘internalism’ and ‘internalist’<sup>5</sup> realism to ‘commonsense realism’<sup>6</sup> to a ““direct” realism”<sup>7</sup> that is non-metaphysical.

---

1 Cf. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

2 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 87.

3 Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 307.

4 Nicholas Rescher, *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), p. 125. Cf. esp. pp. 125-142.

5 Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 54-55, 49-50.

6 Hilary Putnam, *Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1987), pp. 16-17.

7 Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 19.

These brief examples illustrate the dilemma. Neopragmatism cannot, intuitively or logically, be both ‘philosophy’ and its ‘evasion’; epistemology and anti-epistemological ‘deconstructionism’; anti-realism/irrealism and realism, whatever the stripe. Simply stated, neopragmatism cannot be all things to all people championing it as a distinctive form of thought. This lack of internal consistency, if not outright contradiction, over the most basic constitutive notions is now more of a threat to the neopragmatic revival than competing philosophies. Neopragmatism cannot sustain its numerous divergent and frequently irreconcilable interpretations without becoming a meaningless term.

Classical pragmatism, of course, entertained disparate versions. C. S. Peirce, whom William James credited with originating the name and philosophy of pragmatism, temporarily redubbed his version “‘pragmaticism,” which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers’ to differentiate his thought, ironically enough, from James.<sup>8</sup> Dewey likewise evolved his own interpretation.

Despite their differences, what each thinker held in common about mind and world was greater than what separated them, hence their creation of the philosophy known as pragmatism. Furthermore, none of the original three would have imagined that what they were engaged in was not ‘philosophy’ *per se*. Rather, pragmatism was, as James said, ‘a new name for some old ways of thinking’.<sup>9</sup> It was a recovery of the *pragma*, the practical heart of philosophy lost, according to this view, by the abstract and arcane machinery of empirical and rationalist thought.

Pragmatism was, therefore, for Peirce, James and Dewey the return of philosophy to its proper Socratic *milieu*, reconnecting reason to life expressed in all its facets. This life specifically included the religious faith and epistemology too frequently trivialised or dismissed by other philosophical schools of the time. Pragmatism for the classical pragmatists was in this way the *apotheosis* of the philosophical tradition, not its ‘evasion’.

The dilemma for neopragmatism now runs opposite. Neopragmatists increasingly tout their radical differences rather than similarities, whilst perversely continuing to trade under a common name. This is in spite of the evident fact that neopragmatism cannot support, epistemologically or otherwise, all that is claimed for it.

Part of the dilemma is due to the newness of the revival. As a relatively recent development, neopragmatism has been up to now an open field of notional experimentation. By its nature *qua* pragmatism, exactly what neopragmatism means could not be determined *a priori*. But now such unrestricted development is itself the problem.

It is not that the evolution of neopragmatism was ever predetermined, yet because it grows from classical pragmatism the tradition does exert an influence, at least in a proximal sense (even if untheorised or inadequately theorised by some of its proponents). Part I of this book develops a specific genealogy to clarify this historical background and describe the peculiar epistemological shape that neopragmatism carries over from classical pragmatism.

---

8 C. S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings Vol. 2 (1893-1913)* (Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1998), p. 335. *Cf.* below Chapter 3.

9 ‘A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking’ is the subtitle to James’s expository *Pragmatism*.

Neopragmatism's heritage is, of course, not the only determining force. The other major factor is the contemporary epistemological situation giving rise to the revival. Part II evaluates the current philosophical context, critiquing the varieties of neopragmatism in light of Part I. Chapter 6 traces neopragmatism's origins to the breakdown of analytical thought around the mid-twentieth century. In the past twenty-five years that literature on neopragmatism has exploded and chapters 7-10 examine the trajectory of that development in depth. However, it may be stated succinctly here that neopragmatism's attraction, contrary to Rorty, is as a viable epistemological alternative to deconstructionism.

Neopragmatism is widely seen as addressing the current crisis within modernity/postmodernity about the breakdown of rationality and the future of epistemology as a philosophical study. This book develops an argument throughout that goes beyond mere genealogy to a substantive philosophical proposal. It reconstructs neopragmatism epistemologically as *scientifico-Romantic theological realism*.

### **Neopragmatism and the Crisis of Epistemology**

Classical pragmatism attracts contemporary philosophers because it carved out in its own day a middle epistemological position. It balanced issues such as the conceptualisation of knowledge with *praxis*-oriented realism, epistemological fallibilism with epistemological corrigibility and cultural-linguistic relativism with the search for generally universalisable standards. Such balance not only resisted scepticism, but also made possible the type of robust epistemic and moral claims that late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century philosophy sought. The success the classical pragmatists enjoyed as that middle position between empiricism and rationalism is now read as a token for today. It offers at least a possible model of how such a balance might be struck, when neopragmatism stands between the breakdown of analytical thought and rise of deconstructionism.

But neopragmatism is now, even by conservative dating, a generation old. No longer in its infancy, more clarity needs to be established as to what is possible, epistemologically-speaking, and what is mere claim or hope as a revived 'new name for some old ways of thinking'. What counts and, perhaps more importantly, what does not count as neopragmatism needs to be clearly articulated and defended. If not, the revival will be unable to sustain itself and die its own pragmatic-style death. In other words, spread so thin as a notion, appealing to it will not make a practical difference in the areas of inquiry towards which it is addressed.

Furthermore, philosophy has had a generation not only to look forward to the reconstruction of neopragmatism, but also to look back through the earlier tradition. It now possesses a more thorough understanding of classical pragmatism. Knowing this history, it can better gauge those characteristics from classical pragmatism, and from sources behind it, that make contemporary reconstructions possible and give shape to a neopragmatism adequate to the current crisis of epistemology.

This book aims at such clarity. It describes a particular epistemological profile for neopragmatism, if neopragmatism is to accurately reflect its classical forebear. That is, if neopragmatism is to carry forward and reconstruct those characteristics

that make it so attractive to the present epistemological crisis – features such as practicalism, contextualism, ‘critical common-senseism’,<sup>10</sup> naturalism (in a non-materialist sense), holism, fallibilism, corrigibility, methodological adaptability and pluralism, reevaluation of the aesthetic-literary sensibility and so forth – it must adopt a rational form that makes possible the very features it wants to reconstruct.

The issue, in short, is what makes *neopragmatism* pragmatism. Proponents have adopted numerous strategies in their reconstructions, but they tend towards two camps: those who cast wide the genealogical net and those who draw it narrow. Philosophers like West and Rescher represent the latitudinarian impulse. This is not to say that they do not, in the end, reconstruct a specified *neopragmatism* of their own. Yet, they are more inclined towards a view of the pragmatic tradition that is both as inclusive as possible and pliable in its epistemological direction. They may not even see the explosion in versions of *neopragmatism* as a real epistemological problem. As Rescher states:

[P]ragmatism has not managed to achieve a uniform stability but has come to be construed very differently by different philosophers. Nor has pragmatism’s practice always lived up to its own teachings. ...The fact is that pragmatism has been many things to many people and this characterization has been applied over the years to a considerable variety of different theses, theories and teachings – positions of a diversified and sometimes doctrinally conflicting tendency.<sup>11</sup>

Rescher’s strategy is to establish a genealogy that is so wide it extends the range of the classical pragmatists from Peirce, James and Dewey to their contemporaries and near-contemporaries G. H. Mead, F. C. S. Schiller, C. I. Lewis, to near-present and present-day thinkers, including Rudolph Carnap, Nelson Goodman, Donald Davidson, Putnam and Rorty.

His genealogy is overly broad and unsustainable for two reasons. First, Rescher grants secondary early thinkers like Mead, Schiller and Lewis an undeserved influence in defining a pragmatic tradition clearly set and still led in *neopragmatism* by the classical pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey. It is not that other early and middle thinkers’s work was insignificant, but that it was secondary, based upon the contributions of the original three.

Second, Rescher’s later genealogy gives some indication why he elevates these other figures. Whilst Davidson, Putnam and Rorty have all adopted *neopragmatist* themes in their philosophy, Goodman and especially Carnap<sup>12</sup> have not generally been included in this category. They may have addressed aspects of the early *neopragmatic* revival and their writings contributed to the epistemological environment of the period, but the term ‘pragmatist’ or ‘*neopragmatist*’ was not one that either thinker applied to themselves.

Rescher’s rationale for widening the tradition is because he reconstructs an idiosyncratic neoKantian metaphysical trajectory that is not evidenced by a

---

10 Peirce’s term. Cf. *The Essential Peirce Vol. 2*, pp. 346-59.

11 *Realistic Pragmatism*, pp. 48-49.

12 Rescher is the only writer I have found who characterises the logical positivist Carnap as a *neopragmatist*.

consideration of any of the three classical pragmatists. Rescher has in mind a specific lineage tracing to Peirce, even though Peirce fashioned ‘synechic’ pragmatic theory of mind *against* Kantian dualism.<sup>13</sup> James and Dewey similarly rejected such thought. Nonetheless, Rescher expands the lineage to retrospectively discover the genealogical space into which his atypical version of neopragmatism might fit.

Cornel West follows another track. He expands both the genealogy and the definition of pragmatism in order to fit in thinkers that have been excluded historically from the American intellectual tradition. West begins his genealogy with Ralph Waldo Emerson, a source even more vigorously argued for in Chapters 1 and 2, although with different conclusions. Emerson sought to be America’s first true philosopher, but for the most part has not been treated as a philosopher because of the literary-autobiographical (sometimes loose, sometimes recondite) style of his prose. Emerson did not write like any other nineteenth century philosopher, but West does not want this to exclude him from the genealogy. Hence, West’s ‘evasion’ of philosophy begins with the Emersonian prehistory of pragmatism.

West expands the genealogy for another reason. He wants the tradition to include other marginal, and marginalised, thinkers who have not had a natural home in American intellectual history. So West is interested in seeing the tradition as pliant enough to make room for figures as disparate as African American abolitionist W. E. B. DuBois and one-time Marxist Sidney Hook.<sup>14</sup>

West clearly thinks of himself in the same way and reconstructs his ‘prophetic pragmatism’ with the widest possible genealogical scope. West’s version is expressly not philosophy, but ‘criticism’ of a particular kind:

The distinctive hallmarks of a prophetic pragmatist are a universal consciousness that promotes an all-embracing democratic and libertarian moral vision, a historical consciousness that acknowledges human finitude and conditionedness, and a critical consciousness which encourages relentless critique and self-criticism.<sup>15</sup>

West’s neopragmatism is another broad church. It embraces theists and nontheists, and mostly anti-establishment political thinkers, including ‘feminist, Chicano, black, socialist, left-liberal ones’.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that none of these thinkers hold a common epistemological thread and that the ‘distinctive hallmarks’ of prophetic pragmatism are so amorphous, means that it is by *fiat* that West must take pragmatism beyond philosophy, however understood. Yet, as laudatory the impulse to draw in excluded thinkers, West problematises the meaning of ‘pragmatism’ or ‘neopragmatism’ for anyone who wants to understand it in terms of its epistemological implications. His prophetic pragmatism ultimately resembles more of an ideology, and even he identifies it with ‘continental traveling

---

13 *The Essential Peirce, Vol. 1 (1867-1893)* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 313-33. Chapter 7 critiques in depth the neoKantian approach in neopragmatism.

14 *Cf. The American Evasion of Philosophy*, pp. 114-23 and 138-49.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

16 *Ibid.*

theories such as Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism', rather than philosophies or substantive epistemological positions.<sup>17</sup>

Contrast Rescher and West's expansion of the genealogy with another strategy. Whereas their tendency is to include as many figures as possible, others, most notably Richard Rorty, pare down the branches to a narrower lineage. Rorty's neopragmatism is discussed in depth in Chapter 9, but the most remarkable difference to consider at this point is whom Rorty does not include. Indeed, Rorty may be the only neopragmatist who minimises any reference to Peirce, writing Peirce out of the philosophy he ostensibly founded:

I do not think (although I once did) that Peircian [sic] pragmatism is defensible.... Peirce went half-way towards destroying the epistemological problematic which motivated the metaphysical quarrels between idealists and physicalists. He did so by leaving out 'mind' and sticking to 'signs'. But he only went half-way....<sup>18</sup>

For Rorty, Peirce went 'half-way', where James and especially Dewey in his view completed the revolution. Peirce was still engaged in the 'epistemological'. Thus, his version was still philosophy, and realist philosophy at that. It had as its goal an end-point of truth, even if in an idealised eventual convergence by the community of inquirers. In Rorty's controversial definition, pragmatism does away with conventional notions like truth. It moves to language for 'solidarity' in 'telling the story of [human] contribution to a community', rather than 'objectivity' in 'describ[ing] themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality'.<sup>19</sup>

Rorty's strategy illustrates a larger problem underpinning both inclusive and narrow genealogies that dates to pragmatism's earliest days. Peirce saw the problem as a false choice between theoretical directions, such that if pragmatism 'is to be made a science, the very first price we must pay for it must be to abandon all endeavor to make it literary'.<sup>20</sup>

In the contemporary context, the false choice expands between science and literature, epistemology and criticism and versions of realism and anti-realism/irrealism. Rescher's neoKantian emphasis attempts to expand the tradition in order to include the most implausible metaphysical forms of realism. West's genealogy attempts to include the most divergent forms of marginalised criticism, pointing to anti-realism. Rorty attempts to limit the tradition to exclude even non-metaphysical realism such that it maximises a neopragmatic appeal to cultural-literary relativism.

Each approach, of course, appeals to genealogy to support its case. This book traces a genealogy as well, given the unavoidability of drawing upon historical connections in philosophical reconstruction. However, this approach differs from seeking a wider or narrower lineage. It focuses instead on the epistemological commonalities amongst the classical pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey.<sup>21</sup>

---

17 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

18 Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 130-32.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

20 *The Essential Peirce, Vol. 2*, pp. 360-1.

21 Contrary to Rorty, all three considered their thought philosophical and epistemological.

It therefore rejects the dubious recruitative efforts of Rescher, West and others and the equally strained exclusionary strategy of Rorty.

Instead, it draws on the three central thinkers who created the philosophy known as pragmatism. It acknowledges the important differences amongst Peirce, James and Dewey, but recognises their commonalities. It distils from them relevant epistemological features that lend themselves to those pragmatic characteristics enumerated earlier (practicalism, holism, naturalism, contextualism, pluralism and so forth). Furthermore, it sees differences amongst the classical pragmatists not as simple oppositions, i.e. of science *v.* literature, epistemology *v.* criticism and realism *v.* anti-realism/irrealism, but as necessary and creative tensions giving rise to a new type pragmatic realism that incorporates aspects of each.

In short, this book examines Peirce, James and Dewey and asks ‘What is it that they held in common that constitutes pragmatism as a distinctive epistemological approach?’. Rather than postulate an ‘essence of pragmatism’, it follows Wittgenstein’s metaphor of family resemblance and of strands of a rope (in the case of the classical pragmatists, a three-fold cord).<sup>22</sup> It further reconstructs those commonalities or resemblances in a scientifico-Romantic realist version of neopragmatism adequate to the present dilemma and the larger modern/postmodern epistemological context.

### Neopragmatism as Theological Reason

This book argues that the key to understanding pragmatist epistemology is found specifically in the theological understanding of Peirce, James and Dewey. One of the distinctive features of classical pragmatism, if least remarked upon in the revival, is that it was one of few philosophical developments of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century that was also explicitly theological. Religious themes, language and an interest in the dynamics of religious faith were prime concerns, and earlier critics, like Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer, had no illusions about this fact. Russell even treats pragmatism in *History of Western Philosophy* principally as a philosophy of religion.<sup>23</sup>

Neopragmatism’s initial reticence, if not resistance towards theological concerns is attributed by Giles Gunn to Rorty, whose rebarbative attacks on religious faith and institutions are well known.<sup>24</sup> Recently, however, several leading neopragmatists are beginning to incorporate religious faith and God-talk in their work: thinkers as diverse as Putnam, Cavell, West, Stanley Fish and Stephen Carter, amongst others. This unexpected development has even perplexed these thinkers, some of whom are addressing such issues for the first time. In a self-revelatory passage, Putnam states:

As a practicing Jew, I am someone for whom the religious dimension of life has become increasingly important, although it is not a dimension I know how to philosophise about

---

<sup>22</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), §65-69.

<sup>23</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946, pp. 846f..

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Chapter 9 below.

except by indirection; and the study of science has loomed large in my life. ... Those who know my writings from that [earlier and middle] period may wonder how I reconciled my religious streak, which existed to some extent even back then, and my general scientific materialist worldview at the time. The answer is I didn't reconcile them. I was a thorough-going atheist, and I was a believer. I simply kept these two parts of myself separate.<sup>25</sup>

Putnam's *viva* reads like a history of twentieth and twenty-first century Anglo-American philosophy, compassing positivism, analytic thought, post-analytic thought and finally neopragmatism. Like Rorty, there is nothing in his philosophical background that would lead him to theism. Yet, this confession comes only after converting to neopragmatism, a philosophy of epistemological holism that this book argues is deeply rooted in the religious view of the world.

Now that Putnam has forsaken these other types of thought he has begun philosophising about religion with a little more direction. From *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* [1978] where he explored the literary-religious relationship to ethics, to introducing a reprint of Franz Rosenzweig's *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God* [1999],<sup>26</sup> to engaging with theologians over themes like 'God', 'idolatry' and 'religious values',<sup>27</sup> the theological is becoming a significant concern in Putnam's writing.

Even more surprising, Rorty, whom Gunn earlier charged with leading neopragmatism in an atheistic direction, has reversed his approach. He now styles his version of neopragmatism 'romantic polytheism'. He is not avoiding or writing off religious themes anymore, but identifying his thought as a public theology of privatised religious belief. He even theologially reconstructs an immanentised understanding of divinity:

For human perfection becomes a private concern, and our responsibility to others becomes a matter of permitting them as much space to pursue these private concerns – to worship their own gods, so to speak – as is compatible with granting an equal amount of space for all. The tradition of religious toleration is extended to moral toleration. This privatization of perfection permits James and Nietzsche to agree with Mill and Arnold that poetry should take over the role that [traditional] religion has played in the formation of individual human lives.<sup>28</sup>

---

25 From his Gifford Lectures *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 1.

26 Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man and God*, trans. by Nahum Glatzer with an introduction by Hilary Putnam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). In the introduction, Putnam places Rosenzweig in the intellectual company of Buber and Levinas. He goes so far as to consider Rosenzweig's contribution to theology parallel to the impact of Wittgenstein's later thought upon philosophy.

27 Hilary Putnam and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'From Darkness to Light?' Two Reconsiderations of the Concept of Idolatry', in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer 2000, vol. 29, no. 2, p. 19.

28 Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism', in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. by Morris Dickstein (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 22-23.

Rorty is engaging representatives of the mainline theological tradition as well. Lately, he has associated his 'romantic polytheism' with the demythologising approach of Paul Tillich, the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and what he interprets as the 'liberation' influenced documents of the Pope John Paul II Vatican.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the 'revival' of pragmatism is creating another unintended consequence: a theological revival. It is returning 'God' and other theological concepts to respectability in philosophical circles after a century-long banishment. Now that the neopragmatist turn includes a theological turn (or, at least, a nascent one), this book argues the epistemological success of the former is dependent upon correctly understanding and reconstructing the latter.

That theological themes and language are now being raised in neopragmatism speaks to their irrepressibility by anything claiming the pragmatist mantle. More importantly, this book explores how the theological is not just one irrepressible dimension, but constitutive of the tradition. The epistemological features of classical pragmatism and the language they are expressed in arise from the theological understanding of mind and world of the classical pragmatists. It is consistent that the revival of these same epistemological themes would entail the return of a theological rationality. Therefore this book argues not only for the connection between neopragmatism and theological reason. It argues that, correctly understood, neopragmatism is theological reason.

### **Towards Neopragmatic Reconstruction**

This book contends that neopragmatism is theological reason and that that rationality involves a non-metaphysical realist epistemology. As with classical pragmatism, it draws on elements such as practicalism, commonsenseism, holism, naturalism, fallibilism, corrigibility, contextuality, methodological adaptability and pluralism, the autobiographical-literary voice and so forth.

Part I analyses the historical precedent in the work of classical pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey. It searches behind them in twin background sources: the development of modern science and Romantic-Transcendental thought, especially that of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

It is important to recall that Peirce was originally an engineer and experimental scientist, James a medical doctor and Dewey a progressive educator. Contrary to Rorty's deconstructionist reading, none rejected the methodology of the natural and human sciences. Rather, they created pragmatism out of their practical experience of the lack of adequate epistemological models for their work. A hallmark of their pragmatism was their combination of a Transcendental-Romantic understanding with evolving

---

29 Richard Rorty, 'Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance', in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. by Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 84-102 and 'Failed Prophecy, Glorious Hopes', in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. 201-9.

views of modern science.<sup>30</sup> This balance is what makes possible their conception of science and religion in terms of complementarity, rather than opposition.

The question of dual sources again reveals the inadequacy of earlier genealogies that follow the inclusive/exclusive model described above. In such views, the tendency is to skew the trajectory of classical pragmatism, and ultimately neopragmatism, along a Peircean/Peircean-Jamesian axis or a Jamesian/Jamesean-Deweyan one. The upshot is to roughly split the tradition into a scientific and a literary side.

This book contends that such genealogies create from the outset an anti-pragmatic, dualistic way of conceiving of the tradition. The point is that classical pragmatism, and a neopragmatism faithful to the tradition, unites these views in a theological understanding of mind and world, redescribing epistemology in religion-imbued terms.

This observation leads to Part II, which aims at reconstructing this combined scientifico-Romantic trajectory of classical pragmatism against the contemporary backdrop of post-analytic, post-Wittgensteinian thought. This book argues that that shape includes a form of non-metaphysical, commonsensical realism. It describes this 'pragmatic realism' as lying between metaphysical versions of realism made implausible by a post-Wittgensteinian linguistified understanding and Derrida-style deconstructionism where words not only do not touch the world, they infinitely defer meaning.

This neopragmatic version of realism is anti-sceptical. Thus, it follows the classical pragmatist technique of reversing the burden of epistemological proof and requiring good reason for doubt in the first place. This anti-scepticism holds in the philosophy of knowledge, but it also has been adapted in related fields, e.g. literary criticism where it extends to a neopragmatic approach to interpretation. This book discusses such developments and highlights an important distinction of the renaissance: that neopragmatist epistemology has been in large part driven by developments outside the philosophy faculty.<sup>31</sup>

In pragmatically self-fulfilling style, literature, law and, especially, the practice of religion have recovered from the tradition the very epistemological resources they require for their varied areas of inquiry. Much of the most important neopragmatist writing, therefore, is found along the peripheries of, and across divisions between, traditional areas of study. Richard Rorty is a philosopher who has spent most of his career in literature departments. Stanley Fish is an English professor writing on literary criticism and law. Stanley Cavell is a philosopher whose own work, varying from film studies to poetry, calls into question what counts as philosophy. Such cross-pollination and lack of easy categorisation is also descriptive of the earlier pragmatist tradition.

Although much neopragmatic thought grows along the seams of these perceived divisions, it does not minimise the fact that the tradition is still philosophical. The reconstructed scientifico-Romantic neopragmatism of this book is therefore submitted to the guiding modern/postmodern philosophical concerns and the current crisis that

---

30 The classical pragmatists, of course, were not the only philosophers to attempt such a synthesis. G. W. F. Hegel is the most prominent continental thinker in this mode. A discussion of Hegelianism and pragmatism is beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say here that classical pragmatism was more adaptive and less abstract and logico-mathematical than Hegel's dialectical methodology.

31 Cf. especially Chapters 8 and 9.

gave rise to the revival. Much of Part II is devoted to these concerns. It describes a neopragmatism in direct contrast to West and Rorty, both of whom conceive of a philosophically ‘evasive’ or post-epistemological version.

This book argues that if neopragmatism is to be a true *tertium aliquid*, as classical pragmatism was to empiricism and rationalism, it cannot occupy this position by avoiding the issues relevant to modern/postmodern epistemology, but by showing that such a neopragmatism is a more rational way. In this manner, the scientifico-Romantic theological neopragmatism is not offered as another option amongst the *plethora* of neopragmatisms, but is reconstructed as the most historically accurate and presently viable version.

Finally, although this book is primarily concerned with philosophy of religion and, more specifically, epistemology, the final chapter brings this scientifico-Romantic neopragmatic understanding to the work of three theologians: Cornel West, Sallie McFague and Gordon D. Kaufman. It critiques their common project of theological reconstruction, specifically addressing a tendency of all three towards neopragmatic *over*-contextualisation. That is, each tends to be limited by their own self-described pragmatic influenced reconstructions. Whether conceiving of new theological metaphors for God, humanity, world and so forth, they index these notions against the very material conditions towards which they are reconstructed. However, the temptation to gain in contextual specificity, e.g. to reconstruct the notion of divinity in light of a particular view of the economic or environmental situation, threatens the stability of such notions when the thinking about those conditions change. This problem reveals something about the notion of mind and the theological imagination that has not been theorised sufficiently by these thinkers.

The problem is that the *ad hoc*, issue-oriented reconstructions of West, McFague and Kaufman – whether racial-economic justice, gender equity or environmental concern, respectively – unintentionally work against the long-term theological ethic that each thinker requires. Thus, part of the motivation for this book is to establish a theological rationality that makes possible imagination of new models and metaphors, but provides the epistemological stability required for the long-term. The chapter ends with a metaphor for such a scientifico-Romantic theological realism. It tropes a well-known epistemological example, Otto Neurath’s conception of the philosophical enterprise as cooperative nautical exploration, for neopragmatism’s theological rationality.

Thus, this book is a story-telling. It tells the story behind classical pragmatism that underpins neopragmatism. It argues from assumptions within the pragmatist tradition in order to save it from suffocation by the many irreconcilable interpretations claiming the name, and to rescue epistemology from its modern/postmodern *malaise*. Ultimately, it offers a version of neopragmatism that not only makes room for the theological in its rationality, as in the title *Neopragmatism and Theological Reason*. It more radically reconstructs neopragmatism as theological reason.

## Chapter 9

# Neopragmatism and the Return of Religion

The development of literary neopragmatism exerts an important, if not always acknowledged, effect on its philosophical counterparts. This is true of recent literary criticism in general, which, as Knapp and Michaels point out, had ventured so far from literary texts and questions of authorial intention that it had become its own distinct culture of criticism. That culture now extends beyond interpretation and aesthetics into the traditionally philosophical and theological domain of the study of knowledge

Recently, several notable philosophical neopragmatists, like Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam and Stanley Cavell, who trained and made their careers in analytic thought are showing this influence. Most notably, they are collectively adopting an un-analytic, literary-autobiographical voice. This new voice, perhaps even more than the return of interest in pragmatism that is supposedly bringing it about, is a clear indication that something has changed.

Adopting an autobiographical-literary, rather than Enlightenment scientific-logical, style is more than a complaint against the excesses of logical analysis. It is an admission tinged with confession now that analytic thought has run its course. In its confessional, occasionally epigrammatic, sensibility this change in philosophical voice most resembles an earlier version of literary criticism:

The arrogance of philosophy is not one of its best kept secrets. ... A formative idea in planning these lectures was to pose the question whether, or how, philosophy's arrogance is linked to its ambivalence toward the [humanising tendency of the] autobiographical. ... After some years of graduate study in which philosophy interested me but seemed unlikely to be moved by anything I had to say, or by the way in which I seemed fated to say it, I began finding my intellectual voice in the work of the so-called philosophers of ordinary language, J. L. Austin at Oxford and the later Wittgenstein; and, as it turns out, took me years to recognize usefully, importantly because their philosophical methods demand a systematic engagement with the autobiographical.<sup>1</sup>

Cavell's intimation that it was Austin and the later Wittgenstein, two philosophers in some sense still tied to analytic thought, though also eclipsing it, who delivered him *from* analytic thought to the autobiographical-literary is an instructive if perhaps not

---

1 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 3–6.

so eccentric an admission any more.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the level of its acceptance is a token of the sea-change in thinking about the recent history of Anglo-American philosophy.

Rorty's solution is to complete the so-called Wittgensteinian linguistic revolution by making philosophy 'literary' and 'autobiographical'. The recent development of Continental thought is his model and, whilst recovering the thought of Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, figures associated with the Romantic trajectory of thought, the person he most has in mind is 'Derrida, that extraordinarily imaginative, poetic, inventive, ingenious, funny, flesh-and-blood writer', 'the most intriguing and ingenious of contemporary philosophers', a figure for whom even the name 'deconstruction[ist] is inadequate'.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Rorty clearly sees himself as an American equivalent of Derrida, and his version of neopragmatism an Anglo-American analogue to Derridean deconstruction. One of the least noted philosophical differences between the two, however, has been their approach to religion. Derrida, as a result of his criticisms of the 'logocentrism', 'essentialism' and 'presence' that Christianity has bequeathed to philosophy, has enjoyed a serious, career-long engagement with theological thought. This is one reason why many theologians, not just so-called 'postmodern' theologians, have found Derrida useful.<sup>4</sup> Rorty, on the other hand, is well-known for rebarbative attacks on religion, and theologians and philosophers of religion have found him less of a productive resource for their work. This is an understandable, albeit regrettable development, considering Rorty's enormous influence in other areas of the academy, especially literary theory. Thus, theologians and philosophers of religion have found themselves mainly left out of this conversation.

### **Rorty's Theological Turn**

What happened to religion, so central to classical pragmatism, in the neopragmatic renaissance? According to Giles Gunn, 'Religion, it must be said, has not played a very significant role, except perhaps negatively, in the recent renewal of pragmatism'. He pinpoints the source:

There are no doubt many reasons for this, but none is more important than the responsibility that Richard Rorty deservedly bears for helping to promote this revival and the connection he has made between the development of pragmatism and liberalism's project of disenchanting the world religiously.<sup>5</sup>

---

2 Following Quine, Austin was dubious of the analytic-synthetic distinction, and his speech-acts theory grew out of his eventual rejection of the constative-performative distinction. Cf. *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

3 *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 307 and 349f.

4 Interest in Derrida's treatment of late medieval apophatic theology is a prime example. Cf. *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

5 Giles Gunn, 'Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism', in *The Revival of Pragmatism*, p. 404.

Now, however, Rorty has changed. His historical analysis, spelt out in *Consequences of Pragmatism* [1982] and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [1989] is stated succinctly in 'Religion as Conversation-stopper' [1994]. There he repeats Virginia Woolf's famous claim that:

The big change in the outlook of intellectuals – as opposed to a change in human nature – that happened around 1910 was that they began to be confident that human beings only had bodies, and no souls.<sup>6</sup>

For Rorty, the 'central achievement' of Enlightenment thought is the shift in ontological outlook from the vertical to the horizontal, and the secularisation of public life that followed. The reasons for this shift are numerous, overlapping and cumulative: the predictive success of the natural and technical sciences, the influence of Marxist and critical theory and the rise of feminist consciousness, to name several. However, the most important is the rise of liberal inter-subjective awareness and its defining political characteristic in democratic linguistic practices. The further concrete effect, especially when combined with the post-Darwinian, post-Einsteinian worldview, is the redundancy of metaphysical philosophy.

For Rorty, neopragmatism inherits Enlightenment consciousness and must reconstruct itself, Dewey-like, according to the changing view. 'Democratic conversation' replaces metaphysically freighted concepts like 'truth' or 'God' underwriting Rorty's epistemology. Democracy even problematises the originally metaphysical understanding of epistemology itself. If notions like 'God' have a place in democratic discourse, and in 'Religion as Conversation-stopper' Rorty believes they do not, it is only if religious believers submit their 'absolutist' truth claims about them to the public domain of debate. In that *milieu*, their value will be determined by intelligibility and coerciveness, not *a priori* proof or protected rank in a religious group's language game.

Rorty invokes the 'Jeffersonian compromise' to make this point. According to Jefferson, the particular beliefs of any group are tolerated in the public arena if and only if its mode of discourse is itself functionally tolerant, i.e. if religious believers subordinate their truth claims to the rational justification procedures of the democratic community. They cannot 'stop the conversation' or circumvent public adjudication by calling on the epistemological insulation of doctrines like 'special revelation'. Beyond that, Rorty thinks people should keep their faith to themselves:

Contemporary liberal philosophers [such as Rawls, Habermas and Rorty] think that we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty ....<sup>7</sup>

Rorty makes a highly *unpragmatic* move endorsing the Jeffersonian compromise. This notion proceeds from a sharp theoretical, rather than practical, division between

---

6 Richard Rorty, 'Religion as Conversation-stopper', in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 168.

7 Richard Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 170.

the 'public' and 'private' sphere, where aspects such as religion, sexuality and family mores are typically assigned the rubric of private. Differing opinions and practices may be held personally as long as they don't impinge upon the individual's function in the larger social life. If they do, the public value trumps the private.

Rorty's reliance on binaries like public/private and social/individual sacrifices the constitutive insight of classical pragmatism of conceptual holism, or what Hilary Putnam identifies as James's notion of the 'interpenetration' of precisely such theoretical divisions.<sup>8</sup> Rejection of dualistic rationality is a hallmark of classical pragmatist thought. Further, this anti-dichotomising sensibility is what many neopragmatists extend in their work. Putnam, for example, writes of James's view of the interdependence of 'fact, value and theory', to which he adds 'interpretation'.<sup>9</sup> Jurgen Habermas, remarking on James's aphorism that 'The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual, the impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community' describes neopragmatic holism in the 'reciprocal dependence of socialization and individuation, the interrelation between personal autonomy and social solidarity, that is part of the implicit knowledge of *all* communicatively acting subjects ...'.<sup>10</sup> Richard Bernstein even calls on pragmatism's anti-dualism to problematise the division between modernity and postmodernity, creating the compound 'modernity/postmodernity'.<sup>11</sup>

Rorty opens himself to the practical charge that large swaths of human life like religion, sexuality and family cannot be cordoned off neatly into the private sphere. It is a truism, in no small part due to the insight of pragmatism, that all have deep and inextricable connections to public life. Allying his version of neopragmatism with earlier Jeffersonian liberalism, Rorty buys into a dualistic thinking eschewed by the pragmatic tradition and other post-analytical philosophy as well.

The Jeffersonian compromise reinforces a common 'secularising' theme in liberal historiography, exemplified by Max Weber. In Gunn's view, Rorty is indebted first to Weber and Hans Blumenberg's revised Weberian, post-Christian interpretation of social progress.<sup>12</sup> Both point to the increasing religious disenchantment of the world resulting from the rise of democratic consciousness.

An additional source for Rorty's atypical embrace of the Jeffersonian compromise is found closer to home. It is John Dewey, the thinker to whom Rorty is most explicitly indebted. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey identifies the key modern event as the shift to democratic consciousness. As a result, faith becomes a matter of personal choice rather than a necessary obligation as it was in pre-modernity when community and *cultus* were coextensive. Traditional beliefs come under stress with this change, but for Dewey this does not necessitate the loss of religiosity.

8 Cf. William James, 'Lecture II: What Pragmatism Means', in *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, pp. 27–44.

9 *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, p. 64. Cf. also pp. 12–18.

10 Jurgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. by Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), pp. 113–14.

11 Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 11–12.

12 Gunn, 404. Rorty reviewed *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* for *The London Review of Books*.

Rather, democratic consciousness opens up the field for theological reconstruction, of which his radically immanentist theology, discussed above, is an example.

Increasing democratisation for Dewey does not entail increasing disenchantment, as it does for Weber and Blumenberg. Just the opposite. Increasing democratisation makes possible new theological reconstructions. Democracy creates a fluid, non-metaphysically imagined horizon against which conceptions of person, society, world and divinity, and how they fit together, may be creatively re-imagined. Increasing democratisation allows for a *re*-enchantment of the world. For Dewey and James it involves thinking of the divine and the human not in terms of opposition, i.e. creator/creation, sacred/mundane, but plurality and even ecstatic identity. As James states, following Emerson, ‘We are indeed internal parts of God and not external creations’ whose democratic activities are ‘self-reparative’, helping to complete the ‘incompleteness’ of the world.<sup>13</sup>

According to this understanding, Rorty’s position even in ‘Religion as Conversation-stopper’ is not against religious belief *per se*, but against those faiths using impenetrable truths to trump conversation. If, as with Dewey, divinity coalesces with the immanent, then epistemology does not need to look to an absolute external reference for securing belief. Traditional metaphysical thinking about God, in this sense, is not disproved, but rendered irrelevant. It ceases to be a useful way of thinking about God in a democratised context. But this does not require atheism on Rorty’s account, since, as James and Dewey show, it is possible to reconstruct an immanentist theology.

### Neopragmatic Epistemology and Religious Pluralism

Rorty is careful of potential attacks on this view, especially a charge frequently levelled against the Jeffersonian compromise that immanentisation and privatisation of religious belief is tantamount to its reduction. This is the stance of his interlocutor in ‘Religion as Conversation-stopper’, Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter. Rorty, however, thinks privatisation is a reasonable trade-off in the current pluralistic context:

Carter’s inference from privatization to trivialization is invalid unless supplemented with the premise that the nonpolitical is always trivial. But this premise seems false. Our family lives are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. The poems we atheists write, like the prayers our religious friends raise, are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. Writing poems is, for many people, no mere hobby, even though they never show those poems to any save their intimates. The same goes for reading poems, and for lots of other private pursuits that both give meaning to individual human lives and are such that mature, public-spirited adults are quite right in not attempting to use them as a basis for politics. The search for private perfection, pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy.<sup>14</sup>

Rorty’s argument for ‘nontriviality’ is a red herring. No one denies that family, personal poetry or religious belief can be personally meaningful. He relies upon

13 *The Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 138 and 147.

14 Rorty, ‘Religion as a Conversation-stopper’, in *Achieving Our Country*, p. 170.

the specious assumption of a strict separation of the public/private and political/nonpolitical spheres when ‘family lives’ are not solely ‘private’ and ‘nonpolitical’. Family is a social organisation, and the definition of what constitutes family is increasingly a subject of social debate and political dispute. Poetry, even if it is not written to be shared, is constructed from a public language, subject *qua* poetry to the poetical language game. Likewise, religious belief cannot be strictly delimited or simply traded off to one theoretical sphere of life. Rorty misses the fact that none of his examples are only private. At some level all are ‘relevant to public policy’ because all have public implications.

This criticism of Rorty’s position does not deny the usefulness of the public/private distinction in practice. Rather, it rejects how for Rorty it operates ironically like an anti-neopragmatic, *a priori* absolute. Rorty treats it as a Cartesian clear and distinct division or a Sellarsian ‘Given’ when even in the separation-of-church-and-state context in which he raises it the line is constantly shifting. What is public and what is private is determined socially, for example through the legal interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, votes of Congress, the input of states and, finally, the activism of people who can vote to alter the Bill of Rights. The public/private distinction and where that division lies is, at least in the U.S., an increasingly malleable legal-political and, thus, *praxis*-informed division.

Rorty sacrifices the pragmatic observation of holism for the Enlightenment view of a rationally incorrigible public/private division. He backtracks from a Deweyan theological reconstruction to embrace an earlier, Enlightenment-inspired, Jeffersonian attitude. Religious belief for him can either be public, where its assertions are open to debate, criticism, modification or rejection according to publicly accepted criteria, or it can be private, where it may enjoy great personal suasion but where its claims are subordinated to the truth-processes of the democratic community.

Neopragmatist Stanley Fish also rejects Rorty’s view. He denies the connection of neopragmatism and the project of Enlightenment liberalism, or the portrayal of the former as a postmodern extension of the latter. Although Fish’s neopragmatism is indebted to Rorty in other ways, he rejects his dualistic epistemology and the Jeffersonian compromise upon which it operates.<sup>15</sup>

For Fish, the epistemology of the Enlightenment liberal, epitomised by J. S. Mill, and the religious believer, epitomised by St. Augustine of Hippo and John Milton, are at loggerheads. They proceed from irreconcilable suppositions and, even when in dialogue, they speak incommensurable vocabularies:

For the modern liberal, beliefs are what the mind scrutinizes and judges by rational criteria that are themselves hostage to no belief in particular. For Milton, beliefs – in God or in oneself or in the absolute contingency of material circumstances – are the content of a rationality that cannot scrutinize them because it rests on them. Milton’s motto is not ‘Seeing is believing’ but ‘Believing is seeing’; and since what you see marks the boundaries of what you know – whether what you know is that there is a God or that there

---

15 Fish probably borrowed the title of his latest book from Rorty. Cf. Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Richard Rorty ‘Ethics without Principle [1994]’, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

isn't one – that you act, believing is acting. What you believe is what you see is what you do is what you are.<sup>16</sup>

Fish adopts the classical pragmatist view of holism. In his reading of Milton, he links a theory of religious knowledge to the believer's peculiar form of life where the content of belief is not a matter of personal choice, as it is for Rorty.

But Fish establishes an extreme fideist position. A common ordinary language, in this view, does not unite religious and secular discourses. It rather discloses them as epistemological competitors, fighting over the same linguistic space. For Fish, the liberal as well as the believer, even with the best of intentions, cannot help speaking past each other and are doomed to recurring conflict.

The disagreement between Fish and Rorty is clear in their separate confrontations with Stephen L. Carter. Both reject Carter's advocacy of a public theology, but for opposite reasons. With Carter, and against Rorty, Fish eschews the relegation of faith to the private as a reduction. But against Carter, and with Rorty, Fish holds that seeking a place in contemporary liberal discourse, the religious believer trades away what has traditionally been understood to make faith possible: its core of meta-rational truth claims. Rorty thinks this is acceptable; Fish counters that it removes precisely what is religious from religion.

Fish further rejects Carter's liberal public theology with a Barthian stridency:

If you persuade liberalism that its dismissive marginalizing of religious discourse is a violation of its own chief principle [of tolerance], all you will gain is the right to sit down at liberalism's table where before you were denied an invitation; but it will still be *liberalism's* table that you are sitting at, and the etiquette of the conversation will still be hers. ... To put the matter baldly, a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas but to shut it down, at least insofar as it presumes to determine matters that he believes have been determined by God and faith. The religious person should not seek accommodation with liberalism; he should seek to rout it from the field, to extirpate it, root and branch.<sup>17</sup>

Carter's theology is wrong-headed for Fish because it is *moderate* theology. Likewise, Rorty's conception of religion is faulty because it is liberal. Both thinkers are too accommodationist in their view of what believers can and should, respectively, trade away. On Fish's account, accommodation is not what religious faith is about.

Fish subjects Rorty's liberal neopragmatism to the same thing that Rorty subjects theistic metaphysics: a critique of its hidden absolutist claims to knowledge, such as disinterested proceduralism, the public/private split, intolerance of strong religious belief and so forth. Whilst liberalism claims otherwise, it too holds an indefensible absolutistic posture, according to Fish. It merely replaces the transcendental claims of theology with its own dogma of anti-religious foundationalism.

Fish's neopragmatism is neither liberal nor religious. Like Rorty's, at least in 'Religion as Conversation-stopper', it is not even philosophical. Rather, it is a

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Fish, 'Why We Can't All Just Get Along', in *First Things*, vol. 60, February 1996, p. 22. Interestingly, the revised version published in *The Trouble with Principle* measures the hostility of the above quote, ending with '... he should seek to rout it from the field'.

species of anti-foundationalist critique. It is neopragmatism as deconstructionism. It reveals all epistemological disputes to be at their root disputes about language:

The strong poet, in short, is a rhetorician, and if pragmatism is anything ... it is an up-to-date version of rhetoric, that account of thought and action anchored in two famous pronouncements of Protagoras: 'About the gods I cannot say either that they are or that they are not' and 'Man is the measure of all things.' It's all there – the bracketing of ontological questions and the location of knowledge, certainty, and objectivity (of a revisable kind) in the ways of knowing that emerge in history. That is the lesson pragmatism teaches us: that we live in a rhetorical world where arguments and evidence are always available, but always challengeable, and that the resources of that world are sufficient unto most days.<sup>18</sup>

For Fish, neopragmatism is agnostic about the claims of theology. That is because neopragmatism, like Enlightenment philosophy, is not theology. Its proper role is in critiquing the meta-claims of epistemology by means of rhetorical analysis. It can reveal the moderate theology of Carter as melioristic and deconstruct the connection between neopragmatism and democracy of Rorty.

It should be noted that in this view Fish and Rorty are much closer than Fish acknowledges. For Rorty, neopragmatism and democracy are not identical. Nor does his version of neopragmatism necessarily entail democracy, or *vice versa*. Rather, both hook up because 'democracy' describes the fund of rhetorical practices that work for most Western people at the present time.

That democratic practices are largely taken for granted illustrates the pragmatic point. Rather than concern itself with whether and how democratic practices hook up to a metaphysical structure of the universe, both Rorty and Fish think neopragmatism should measure their usefulness *in praxis*. In James's terms, it is in this way that the value of truth is 'cashed out'. Rorty maintains there is no requirement for philosophical to 'justify' democratic politics. Democracy is self-justifying to those communities that find it helpful to collectively imagine, decide amongst and work-to-realise what Dewey termed the 'ideal ends' of human existence. This is how Rorty conceives of truth, religious or otherwise.

In the same way that contemporary science seems more plausible than Aristotelian physics, Rortyan neopragmatism is guided by what 'seems' the best with respect to the right and the true, according to the view of a particular time and place. This view can and does change, affirming the pragmatist balance between epistemological corrigibility and historical-critical contextualism. But instead of fashioning his neopragmatism along the lines of a fallibilistic realism, such as Peirce, Putnam or the rational-procedural methodology of Habermas, Rorty opts for the weaker 'cautionary' use of the term 'true'. For him, a Dewey-style 'idealized rational acceptability' equates to 'acceptability to *us* at our best' when arguing for one view over another.<sup>19</sup>

There is only better or worse with respect to whatever counts at a particular time, in a particular community's practices of rational justification. For both Rorty and

---

18 *The Trouble with Principle*, p. 307.

19 Richard Rorty, 'Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace', *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3*, p. 52.

Fish there is no external philosophical ‘principle’, the reference to which secures once-and-for-all our ethical and epistemological judgements. The hope for one and anxiety because it cannot be found is what remains after the demise of metaphysics. The proper arena in which ‘truth’ is adjudicated for Rorty is not philosophy or science, but *politics*. Fish’s version of neopragmatism as rhetoric agrees with this stance.

Rorty characterises his view as ‘ethnocentrism’, believing our beliefs will never convince everyone, only those whose beliefs and justification practices significantly overlap our own. Here Rorty holds a more epistemologically generous position than Fish. Like James and Dewey, Rorty sees a significant overlap not only with respect to democracy, but also in the scientific view of the universe as well.

Rorty has even begun to explore this overlap in an explicitly theological reconstruction, calling his version of neopragmatism ‘romantic polytheism’. He begins by asking Dewey’s question, How are we to conceive of notions like ‘human nature’ and ‘the good’ in a democratic, post-Darwinian, post-Einsteinian age?

Rorty holds that current biology and psychology define humans as ‘clever animals trying to increase our happiness by continually reinventing ourselves’.<sup>20</sup> We are Virginia Woolf’s ‘bodies’, led by a non-metaphysical, relativistic understanding of the good. For Rorty, the good is the good-which-we-choose as best at any given time. It is happiness that, in the present context, unpacks as adaptive, nonmetaphysical, utilitarian eudaimonism.

Rorty draws a twofold connection between modern science, on the one hand, and democratic utilitarianism, on the other. The former provides a viable socio-biological description of the good, identifying it with human happiness, whilst the latter provides concrete mechanisms to bring it about for the greatest number of people.

Rorty has begun to connect this reconstruction of ‘the human’ and ‘the good’ with humanistic, demythologising theology. He has done this over and against both the fundamentalistic image of religious discourse held by Fish and the metaphysical strain in James which allows him in the absence of publicly verifiable evidence to say ‘the best things are the more eternal things’.<sup>21</sup>

Paul Tillich is a theologian whom Rorty sees as sharing common ground. He identifies in Tillich both an affirmation of the Jeffersonian compromise and a Deweyan concern that religious conceptions be reconstituted against an immanentist worldview:

A pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief. Liberal Protestants, to whom Tillich sounds plausible, are quite willing to talk about their faith in God, but demur at spelling out what beliefs that faith includes. Fundamentalist Catholics to whom Tillich sounds blasphemous are happy to enumerate their beliefs by reciting the Creed and identify their faith with those beliefs. The reason the Tillichians think they can get along either without creeds, or with a blessedly vague symbolic interpretation of credal statements, is that they think the point of religion is not to produce any specific habit of action but rather to make the sort of difference to a human life which is made by the presence or absence of love.<sup>22</sup>

---

20 *Ibid.*, p. 276.

21 Richard Rorty, ‘Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance’, *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. by Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 94.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.

Tillich's conception of God as the only object proper to our 'ultimate concern' is, according to Rorty, a prime example of Dewey-style reconstruction. Of course, Tillich conceived of this notion as metaphysically transcendental, deriving it from the Christian belief in God as the source of the ontology that Rorty rejects. But Rorty's admiration has less to do with what Tillich retains of the orthodox Christian conceptual scheme than with how Tillich reconstructs those conceptions in light of existential metaphysics.

Rorty acknowledges that this tends to anthropocentrise theology, a criticism, by the way, also levelled by Barth even though Tillich's notion of 'ultimate concern' was intended to relativise any particular humanistic notion of the divine. But this is precisely what attracts Rorty to Tillich's 'demythologising'. The notion of God as the object proper to *our* ultimate concern is what makes the divine imaginable in pragmatic-utilitarian terms, for Rorty. It relocates God-talk from the realm of abstract concepts to the lived experience of those who choose to take that notion seriously.

On Rorty's tenuous reading, Tillichian demythologising accords with the Jeffersonian compromise. It keeps faith within the sphere of the private. This is possible because of the conceptual opaqueness of a demythologised deity: the interpretations of what constitutes the object of ultimate concern are so potentially divergent, they by *fiat* relegate to private belief. Situating God-talk in this way dispenses with the traditional recite-and-assent formula of creeds for Rorty. It provides for flexibility in individual conceptions of the deity, especially for him, towards those encouraging the social co-operation necessary for democratic politics.

Tillich is not the only theologian whom Rorty admires. He finds a similar neopragmatic-utilitarian strain in the social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and in the 'most socialistic of the papal encyclicals'.<sup>23</sup> The connection of both to Marxist thought exposes another impulse behind Rorty's theological reconstruction. In so far as Marxism projects a future social utopia *in* the world, it redescribes a secular version of Christian eschatology. For Rorty, it manifests a spirit derived and in a sense inextricable from Christian hope:

If one treats the term 'Christianity' as the name of one such appeal [to hope], rather than as a claim to knowledge, then that world still names a powerful force working for human decency and human equality. 'Socialism,' similarly considered, is the name of the same force – an updated, more precise name. 'Christian Socialism' is pleonastic: nowadays you cannot hope for the fraternity which the Gospels preach without hoping that democratic governments will redistribute money and opportunity in a way that the market never will. There is no way to take the New Testament seriously as a moral imperative, rather than as a prophecy, without taking the need for such redistribution equally seriously.<sup>24</sup>

Rorty, the once-confirmed atheist largely responsible, according to Gunn, for the atheistic bent of the pragmatist revival is now an apologist for existentialist and liberationist Christian theology. He recommends them as two approaches in contemporary theological reconstruction, along the lines of Dewey in *A Common Faith*.

23 'Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes' [1998], in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 206.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

## Romantic Polytheism as Neopragmatist Reconstruction

The distance between the atheism of ‘Religion as Conversation-stopper’ [1994], the recommendation of Tillich in ‘Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance’ [1997] and the defence of Marxist-influenced theology in ‘Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes’ [1998], is bridged by a paper he presented at a 1995 conference on neopragmatism: the very same conference where Gunn made his observation that neopragmatism’s relative lack of interest in religion could be attributed to Rorty. That paper, ‘Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism’, not only marks Rorty’s adoption of a religious vocabulary. It explicitly *identifies* his neopragmatism as theology.

To make that identification, Rorty expands his previous list of constituent influences on pragmatism, from democratic liberalism, contemporary science and utilitarian ethics, to include a ‘romantic, Coleridgean strain’ exemplified in J. S. Mill’s utilitarianism.

The connection between Romanticism, especially its American Transcendentalist version, and pragmatism is drawn earlier in this book, specifically to the prehistory of pragmatism in Ralph Waldo Emerson. This connection is problematic for Rorty. Emerson was a rational idealist, too metaphysical to reasonably consider the grandfather of his own anti-metaphysical neopragmatism. Rorty instead traces the genealogy to thinkers at a remove from Emerson, even to candidates as unlikely as Friedrich Nietzsche.

Tracing an equally doubtful source to Mill frees Rorty to describe a less metaphysical Romanticism and therefore a different Romantic imprint on pragmatism. This, in turn, provides him the theoretical space necessary to reconstruct a different, non-metaphysical type of neopragmatic theology.

Mill’s utilitarian Romanticism is anti-Benthamite, exchanging religious dogma and moral calculus for poetry as the proper source of human ideals. Mill’s substitution is utilitarian-pragmatic for Rorty, shifting from the language of eternal metaphysics to that of the human imagination. It is also Romantic in shifting from the philosophical ideal of the unitary to the aesthetic ideal of the plural. The effect of both for Rorty is a further shift in outlook from the supernatural to the natural.

The upshot is still theistic, *polytheistic*, according to Rorty. It involves no loss or minimisation of the religious *per se*, only of monotheistic religion:

Here is a definition of ‘polytheism’ that covers both Nietzsche and James. You are a polytheist if you think that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs. Isaiah Berlin’s well-known doctrine of incommensurable values is, in my sense, a polytheistic manifesto. To be a polytheist in this sense you do not have to believe that there are nonhuman persons with powers to intervene in human affairs. All you need is to abandon the idea that we should try to find a way of making everything hang together, which will tell all human beings what to do with their lives, and tell all of them the same thing. Polytheism, in the sense I have defined it, is pretty much coextensive with romantic utilitarianism.<sup>25</sup>

25 Richard Rorty, ‘Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism’, in *The Revival of Pragmatism*, p. 24.

Again, Rorty proceeds from strained interpretations of his chosen thinkers to connect one strand of Romanticism with an anti-transcendental definition of polytheism and his version of neopragmatism. It would be easy at this point to write off this move, yet there are strong reasons to consider it a genuine attempt at theological reconstruction. Rorty's use of 'polytheism' is an example of his favoured technique of linguistic 'irony', of 'playing the new off against the old', that he uses against traditional conceptions of philosophy and science. Rorty's desire is not to undermine philosophy or science, only their insistence on 'final vocabularies'. Theology, especially Tillich's notion of 'ultimate concern', contains a similar interest with its prohibition of idolatry.

Beyond an instrumentalist critique, Rorty adopts such theological language in a substantive reconstruction. In true pragmatist fashion he imagines, How might faith be sensibly adapted to fit the democratic, post-Darwinian, post-Einsteinian world? 'Romantic polytheism' is his understanding of the religious point of view that holds the Romantic ideal of the pursuit of personal perfection in this world as the *telos* towards which humans should aspire.

Rorty cites his predecessor Dewey, ascribing to him the belief of 'democracy as Christianity cleansed of the hieratic, exclusionist elements'.<sup>26</sup> Whilst this grossly oversimplifies Dewey's theological position, it allows Rorty to undertake a thought experiment asking, What if Christianity followed a Deweyan 'non-Platonic and non-exclusivist' course of development? and, What might Christianity look like today if it centred belief in a private love ethic rather than insisting that 'God and truth are one?' Could it have avoided, could it avoid today, the antinomy between scientific, political and religious authority?

Rorty's neopragmatism as romantic polytheism is a redescription of a possible Christianity for the modern/postmodern age. At the heart of his musings is the same concern perplexing theology: How can Christianity conceive of itself in the present pluralistic context? Rorty answers, By reconceiving itself as a polytheism of privately held faiths. Christianity can coexist with others, but only along the lines of the Jeffersonian compromise. For Rorty, it must needs trade off its exclusivist monotheist claims to the private sphere, sublating them in favour of social-pragmatic utility.

Earlier in his career, Rorty advocated the priority of democracy to philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Now he argues for the priority of democracy to a particular type of theology:

Your devotion to democracy is unlikely to be wholehearted if you believe, as monotheists typically do, that we can have knowledge of an "objective" ranking of human needs that can overrule the results of democratic consensus. But if our devotion is wholehearted, then you will welcome the utilitarian and pragmatist claim that we have no will to truth distinct from the will to happiness.<sup>28</sup>

and

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I*, pp. 175–96.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

In a democratic society, everybody gets to worship his or her personal symbol of ultimate concern, unless worship of that symbol interferes with the pursuit of happiness by his or her fellow-citizens.<sup>29</sup>

Neopragmatism as romantic polytheism is a private ethico-aesthetic Christianity set in the context of the present religiously pluralistic worldview. It is a version that draws a new trajectory for Christian thought. It makes possible the interpretation of the existentialist theology of Tillich, the social Gospel of Rauschenbusch and the liberationist influenced documents of the Vatican as the true inheritors of Christian orthodoxy.

Rorty's theistic turn grows out his exploration of the Romantic imprint on pragmatism and what he sees as the incipient anti-logocentrism of the Romantics in their turn to 'poetry' instead of a monotheistic 'God' or other 'transcendentals' as a 'source of ideals'. Rorty fashions a neopragmatist genealogy broad enough to account for such an immanentised view of human teleology. He side-steps the background figure this book posits, the metaphysical, explicitly theological Romantic Ralph Waldo Emerson for whom such an immanentised view would be problematic.

Rorty presents an occult genealogy. He wrongly attributes the view of an immanentised polytheism in part to a detheologised 'romantic, Coleridgean strain' in pragmatism, for example. He is correct in identifying Coleridge's influence running from Emerson to James and Dewey, but wrong in imputing non-theism to the initially Unitarian and later Trinitarian Coleridge.<sup>30</sup> Rorty also dubiously traces the Romanticism behind pragmatism to 'Mill's poetic, anti-Benthamite' thought and, of course, to Nietzsche. Rorty appears to be the only scholar making this connection.

Again, it is not so much that Rorty gets the Romantic inheritance wrong, as only half-right, drawing upon the wrong Romantics or attributing false notions to the right ones. Rorty's 'pragmatism as romantic polytheism' genealogy, however implausible, is important for two reasons. First, it is the apotheosis of the anti-representationalist turn made in 1982's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, one of the most widely read and influential philosophy books outside of philosophy in the past twenty years or so. Rorty at once completes the turn to language, moving beyond the scientific model to the autobiographical-literary idiom of 'poetry'. He places himself, along with Cavell and increasingly Putnam, at odds with a philosophy of which he was a prime mover. Their collective move follows a transition described earlier by Wittgenstein, Quine and Sellars, and *de facto* moves neopragmatism closer to the Romantic-literary style.

Second, this transition to the Romantic literary-autobiographical voice betrays sharp *a priori* logical distinctions, which are the trademark of analytic thought, but also those divisions within the rational subjectivity adopted by epistemologies mimicking the divisions within science, such as Kant's. The Romantic poetic imagination cuts across these divisions. They are not seen as absolute, but provisional. They are even, like

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Richard Holmes's *Coleridge: Early Visions* and *Coleridge: Dark Reflections* (London: Flamingo, 1999).

Emerson's transparent eyeball, opaque. This works against Rorty's separation of public and private, revealing echoes of Kantianism contrary to his appeals to Romanticism.

Unfortunately for Rorty, who made a reputation lampooning religion, his Romantic genealogy also means that theological reason also cannot be cordoned off or excluded from subjective rationality. The great irony, played on the liberal ironist himself, is that in reconstructing his neopragmatism as an updated, atheistic version of Romanticism, Rorty cannot exclude the religious without falling into the type of *a priori* distinctions that it eschews. He now goes so far as to identify himself with theism, describing 'pragmatism as Romantic polytheism'. His reconstruction of 'romantic polytheism' as 'think[ing] that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs' and that there are no 'nonhuman persons with power to intervene in human affairs' indicates a privatised approach to faith:

For human perfection becomes a private concern, and our responsibility to others becomes a matter of permitting them as much space to pursue these private concerns – to worship their own gods, so to speak – as is compatible with granting an equal amount of space to all. The tradition of religious toleration is extended to moral toleration. This privatisation of perfection permits James and Nietzsche to agree with Mill and Arnold that poetry should take over the role that [traditional] religion has played in the formation of individual human lives.<sup>31</sup>

Rorty's transition from bald atheism to 'pragmatism as Romantic polytheism' is a strange and unsuccessful attempt to write neopragmatism as a public theology. Nonetheless, it is instructive in showing how the principal thinker of the main school of U.S. philosophy is forced not only to take religion seriously, but to reconstruct his philosophy theistically as a result of linking it with Romanticism. In such a move, Rorty is not far different from his classical predecessors William James and John Dewey who, in *A Pluralistic Universe* and *A Common Faith* respectively, undertook similar theological reconstructions.

### **Religious Turns in Cavell and Putnam**

Rorty is not the only neopragmatist confronting religion from the inside of neopragmatism. Stephen Mulhall argues that Stanley Cavell's notion of 'Emersonian perfectionism as redemptionism' contains significant 'structural analogies' to the 'Christian story of redemption'. For Mulhall, in spite of Cavell's renunciation of religious faith as a competitor to his neopragmatism's 'Emersonian perfectionism', 'it could well be argued that the question of Cavell's understanding of his relationship with religion is not merely one element amongst others in his work, but the most fundamental and so the most revealing of his preoccupations'.<sup>32</sup> Mulhall traces the 'dominance' of this 'relationship' to Emerson's Romanticism, which is again ironic, since the figure whom Rorty avoids for being too metaphysically religious is

---

31 *The Revival of Pragmatism*, pp. 23–4.

32 *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, p. 285.

precisely the one whose adoption compels Cavell further than Rorty into an atheistic version of neopragmatism.

The surprising thing is not that a philosopher like Cavell claims atheism, *de rigueur* for Anglo-American philosophy faculties. What is surprising is that in a supposedly post-religious age Cavell continues to talk about the Christian story as a viable competitor to his secularised Emersonianism and to adopt a religiously founded 'Emersonian perfectionism' scheme of quasi-redemption. In spite of Cavell's protests, this move is less of a rejection of faith than a James- and Dewey-style, as well as now Rorty-style, reconstruction focusing on the imaginative, literary and mytho-poetic theological imagination.

Cavell eschews Rorty's earlier tactic of treating religion as irrelevant, ceasing to raise God and faith as philosophical questions and, thus, move beyond them. Rather, Cavell follows a well-worn pragmatist route reconstructing a type of faith and keeping religion in play. None of this is to mention his suggestive autobiographical struggles about being a Jew and a philosopher, specifically 'the ways my Jewishness and Americanness inflect each other' and his strong feelings on visiting Israel. He refuses to write these concerns off 'as a clinical issue' rather than 'a critical issue', which colour 'certain forms taken by my devotion to Thoreau and to Emerson as expressions of that issue'.<sup>33</sup>

To complete the triumvirate, Hilary Putnam, who, considering his earlier career in positivism seemed the most unlikely to end up as a leading neopragmatist, now also raises issues of faith. In a telling admission in his Gifford lectures, he says:

As a practicing Jew, I am someone for whom the religious dimension of life has become increasingly important, although it is not a dimension I know how to philosophize about except by indirection; and the study of science has loomed large in my life. ... Those who know my writings from that [earlier] period may wonder how I reconciled my religious streak, which existed to some extent even back then, and my general scientific materialist worldview at that time. The answer is I didn't reconcile them. I was a thorough-going atheist, and I was a believer. I simply kept these two parts of myself separate.<sup>34</sup>

Now that he has become a leading proponent of neopragmatism, Putnam has been in a process of uniting these 'two parts of myself' and philosophising about religion with a bit more direction. As early as 1978's *Meaning and the Moral Science*, originally delivered as the 1976 John Locke Lectures in Oxford, he explored the literary-religious relationship to realist ethics. Most recently he wrote an introduction to an edition of the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig's *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God* in which he ranks Rosenzweig alongside Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas as the most important Jewish thinkers of the past century, comparing his intellectual contribution to that of Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>35</sup>

---

33 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. xv.

34 Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 1.

35 Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*, trans. and with an introduction by Nahum Glatzer and with an introduction by Hilary Putnam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 1–18.

Whilst Putnam emphasises that the task of the philosopher and the theologian are separate, in drawing parallels between such thinkers, he too is starting to venture into the epistemology of religion.