

In order to learn you must desire to learn!

Pragmatism, naturalism and the need for an ethics of inquiry.

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0. Introduction

1. Metaphilosophy
2. Naturalism in the analytic tradition
3. Pragmatic Naturalism as a theoretical metaphilosophy
4. Pragmatic Naturalist *ethical* challenge to philosophical mainstream.
5. Synthesis of theoretical Pragmatic Naturalism and *ethical* Pragmatic Naturalism.
6. Peirce and Dewey as exemplars to go forward.
7. Back to Darwin.

I. ¿What's wrong with Philosophy?

Were it not Dewey's, this phrase could have been written today and it would have been as insightful and urgent as it was then.

Inquiry degenerates into sterile specialization, a kind of intellectual busy work carried on by socially absent-minded men. Details are heaped up in the name of science, and abstruse dialectical developments of systems occur. Then the occupation is “rationalized” under the lofty name of devotion to truth for its own sake. (Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, MW 4.204)

The question of philosophical *significance*. What does it mean to do philosophy in terms of “Why does Philosophy matter?”

I. ¿What's wrong with Philosophy?

This is a broad metaphilosophical challenge that needs clarification.

According to Rorty ([1961], 2014), asking these kinds of questions *to* Philosophy and feeling the urge to answering them is what distinguishes the Philosophical tradition from other intellectual traditions, like Science or Literature. If one worries about the aims of those traditions one is doing Philosophy, but if one worries about Philosophy *in* Philosophy, one is still doing Philosophy.

I. ¿What's wrong with Philosophy?

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Rorty takes the metaphilosophical game of giving and asking of reasons as

Philosophers are known to be cruel creatures.

In this game, one popular move is “the appeal to self-consistency” to challenge other philosophical systems. Something like: “that’s a nice philosophical distinction you have there, would you mind if I apply that distinction to itself and see what happens?”

I. ¿What's wrong with Philosophy?

The central paradox of metaphilosophy:

[M]etaphilosophy aims at neutrality among philosophic systems, and yet each system can and does create its own private metaphilosophical criteria, designed to authenticate itself and to disallow competitors. The presence of this paradox shows us that the quest for absolute neutrality, and for a categorical imperative which would bind all philosophers equally, is hopeless. (Rorty, [1961], 2014)

I. ¿What's wrong with Philosophy?

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Another route is the ever-present possibility of an appeal to practice instead of answering challenges in a metaphilosophical (theoretical) way.

This is characteristic of new sciences that spring *from* Philosophy. They leave the meta-discourse to Philosophers and leave the family home to go live lives of their own.

I. ¿What's wrong with Philosophy?

Another route is the ever-present possibility of an appeal to practice instead of answering challenges in a metaphilosophical (theoretical) way.

Rorty notes that such renouncement of metaphilosophy and the appeal to practice is the framing of the issue in *moral* terms, instead of purely theoretical terms. If unconditional reasons are not available, maybe conditioning one's practice to its results (or other practices) can help.

II. Naturalism and Quietism.

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Wittgensteinian Quietists believe that Philosophy oversteps its proper bounds when it makes original claims. It's proper job is to dissolve pseudo-problems, not to solve them.

II. Naturalism and Quietism.

Brian Leiter (2004) identified two main strands in contemporary analytic philosophy: Naturalism and Wittgenstein Quietism.

Naturalists believe that (good) Philosophy is properly constrained by science in some sense. Vaguely, it marks a commitment to anti-supernaturalism.

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

In a first sense, naturalist is someone who believes that everything there is is natural, and, therefore, it is not necessary to appeal to no supernatural entity or force to explain the things that happen in our world. (...) In this point, the cultural influence that the theory of evolution of Darwin has had is of special importance. (Pérez, 2002, p. 108)

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

Regarding the identification in question, it suffices here to note that the naturalist is one who of necessity has respect for the conclusions of natural science. (*LW*, 15.48)

Aside from displaying systematic disrespect for scientific method, supernaturalists deny the findings of science when the latter conflict with a dogma of their creed. (*LW*, 15.57)

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

“What is philosophical naturalism? Most fundamentally, presumably, **it is the view that natural science properly constraints philosophy**, in the following sense. (...) At the very least, (...) to be a philosophical naturalist is to believe that philosophy is not simply a different enterprise from science, and that philosophy should defer to science, where the concerns of the two disciplines coincide.”
(Price, 2013, p. 3)

In the broad sense, **‘naturalism’ names a philosophical position distinguished by its willingness to conform to the standards of inquiry at its best.** (Kitcher, 2012, p. xv)

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

In this broad sense, naturalism is not mere anti-supernaturalism but an explicit commitment to science and its results in Philosophy.

- 1) Science and Philosophy are not merely independent.
- 2) When the two overlap, Philosophy must give way.
- 3) Philosophy must be sensitive to the best standards of inquiry of its time.

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

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Naturalism in these broad strokes, says Price (2013), has been traditionally understood as comprising two theses:

Ontological doctrine: the view that in some important sense, all there *is* is the world studied by science.

Epistemological doctrine: the view that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge. (Price, 2013, pp. 4-5)

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

Object naturalism:

“So far as philosophy is concerned with the nature of objects and properties of various kinds, its concern is with something in the natural world, or with nothing at all.” (Price, 2002, p. 5)

To legitimate Philosophy to Science, Philosophical discourse must be reducible to scientific discourse.

This causes a series of problems.

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

Object naturalism:

Placement problems:

Certain Philosophical vocabularies such as the modal, the mental, meaning, mathematics and the moral seem hard to “place” in a physicalist framework.

In particular, semantic concepts like “reference” or semantic normativity seem hard to place.

III. Naturalisms and their problems.

I want to distinguish object naturalism from a second view of the relevance of science to philosophy. According to this second view, philosophy needs to begin with what science tells us *about ourselves*. Science tells us that we humans are natural creatures, and if the claims and ambitions of philosophy conflict with this view, then philosophy needs to give way. This is naturalism in the sense of Hume, then, and arguably Nietzsche. I'll call it *subject naturalism*. (Price, 2002, p. 5)

IV. Pragmatic Naturalism

I want to advance a position that comprises a series of recent theses advances by Robert Brandom (2011), Björn Ramberg (2004), Martin Kusch (2002) in order to characterize what I will call “pragmatic naturalism”.

1. *Subject Naturalism* (Price, 2004, 2011)

1. *Fundamental Pragmatism* (Brandom, 2011)

1. *The Community Thesis* [regarding semantic normativity] (Kusch, 2002)

IV. PN: Fundamental Pragmatism

It is characteristic of pragmatists in the broad sense to see knowing *how* as having a certain kind of explanatory priority over knowing *that*. This is one influential form taken by an insistence on the explanatory primacy of the practical over the theoretical. Explicit theoretical beliefs can be made intelligible only against a background of implicit practical abilities. (Brandom, 2011, p. 65)

IV. PN: Fundamental Pragmatism

Fundamental pragmatism considers that practical intentionality explains and is presupposed by discursive intentionality.

Fundamental pragmatism, in Brandom's sense, opposes an intellectualist order of explanation that considers that propositional knowledge *explains* and is presupposed by practices. Such order of explanation generates problems such as the paradox of inference as identified by Lewis Carroll in "What the Tortoise said to Achilles" (1895)

1. **Minimal inferentialism [regarding beliefs] (MI)**: A belief *that* p would be idle unless it entailed beliefs compatible and incompatible with p .
2. **Intellectualism (I)**: What p entails must be codified in explicit propositional rules in order for the inferences from p to be valid.
3. **Normativity of interpretations (NoI)**: the application (interpretation) of a rule is something that can itself be incorrect. [this is a major point in the *Philosophical Investigations*]

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4. If the belief *that p* has amongst its implications (for example) *not-not-p* (by 1), we can then ask which rule codifies and validates this very implication (by 2), originating “if *p* & (if *p*, then *not-not-p*), therefore *not-not-p*” and so on (by the ever present demand from 2 and 3). In such a way that the constant and antecedent obligation to provide that which enables the inference from “*p*” to “*not-not-p*” puts more and more rules in the middle of these two propositions so that we could never make the inference (legitimately).

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5. We cannot accept 2) as a solution to 1). (in pain of a vicious infinite regress) (Brandom, 2011, p. 32).

IV. PN: Fundamental Pragmatism

Step 4) can be further clarified as follows:

1. “ p ” is believed by X .
2. $p \vdash \neg\neg p$ (by *MI* and 1)
3. $(p \wedge (p \rightarrow \neg\neg p)) \vdash \neg\neg p$ (by *I* and 1)
4. $(p \wedge ((p \wedge (p \rightarrow \neg\neg p)) \rightarrow \neg\neg p)) \vdash \neg\neg p$ (By *NoI*, *I* and 2).
5. And so on.

IV. PN: Fundamental Pragmatism

Beliefs would be idle unless the believer could at least sometimes tell what followed from them and what was incompatible with them. But distinguishing the potential beliefs that are incompatible with a given belief, and those that are its inferential consequences is a practical skill or ability: a kind of know how. (...) Being able explicitly to believe *that p* (endorse a theory) presupposes a background of practical implicit know how. (Brandom, 2011, p. 66)

Fundamental pragmatism counsels looking first to what discursive subjects are *doing*, to the abilities they can exercise, to the practices they engage in. If a naturalistic story can be told about *that*, it might well be that no questions remain that should trouble the naturalist. (2011, p. 11)

IV. PN: Fundamental Pragmatism

Fundamental pragmatism allows seeing formal inferences as subsidiary to material inferences such as:

- i) “Bariloche is to the south of Villa La Angostura; therefore Villa La Angostura is to the north of Bariloche” not enthymemes that omit hidden semi-formal premises such as,**
- ii) “if x is to the south of y, then y is to the north of x”**

This allows us to see formal logical vocabulary as a refinement and critical instrument to the practice of inference and not as an intellectualist (ahistorical) presupposition of it. In such a way, logic can be seen as normative (as in Peirce) without making it unnaturalizable or mysterious.

IV. PN: The Community Thesis

I want to present the last component of what I've called a version of pragmatic naturalism: the Community Thesis, so called by Martin Kusch (2002), as a corollary of the “rule-following considerations” taken to be the core of the “private language argument” as rendered by Kripke (1982) and to be found in the sections comprising § 137-242 of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations.

Normative statuses of responsibility are social statuses: creatures of our practical attitudes of taking or treating each other as responsible and committed. (Brandom, 2011, p. 32)

...[N]ormative phenomena—rules, norms, conventions, prescriptions, and standards of correctness—can exist only within communities.”

...[S]ocially isolated individuals are unable to generate normative phenomena. Let me call this idea the ‘community thesis’.” (Kusch, 2002, p. 175)

IV. PN: The Community Thesis

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3. Normativity presupposes community. / Without social friction (in present tense) one cannot properly distinguish between 'is correct' and 'seems correct' - The individualist alternatives [i.e. dispositionalist] analyzed by Kripke and Wittgenstein cannot account for normativity.

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4. Ergo: Private rule-following is impossible. - By a disjunctive syllogism summed up in 3) (Kusch, 2002, p. 176)

IV. PN: The Community Thesis

This is an argument in Philosophy of Language, but it is not far from the sentiment of Peirce's epistemological communitarian claims, such as:

The individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation. This is man,

... proud man,

Most ignorant of what he's most assured,

His glassy essence. (CP 5.317)

IV. PN: The Community Thesis

The current discussion of language--also a topic of basic importance--affords another example. Students of this subject, from a logical and a social point of view, who regard themselves as anti-metaphysical scientific positivists, write as if words consisted of an "inner," private, mentalistic core or substance and an "outer" physical shell by means of which a subjective intrinsically incommunicable somewhat gets conveyed "trans-subjectively"! And they appear quite unaware of the extra-natural origin and status of their postulate. Until naturalists have applied their principles and methods to formulation of such topics as mind, consciousness, self, etc., they will be at a serious disadvantage. For writers of the "rational" philosophical variety of anti-naturalism almost always draw their premises from alleged facts of and about mind, consciousness, etc. They suppose the "facts" are accepted by naturalists. When they do not find the conclusions they draw, they accuse naturalists of holding an inconsistent and truncated position. ("Anti-Naturalism in extremis", LW 15.50)

V. Kitcher's (deweyan) *practical* turn.

Human beings pursue inquiry profitably by selecting issues that matter to them, by considering certain types of order that they can find, or sometimes create, in their natural and social environments--pockets of order like Newtonian or Mendelian systems. **Success accrues not by discovering all the truths, but by answering the questions that matter.** (Kitcher, 2012, introduction, s. 3)

V. Kitcher's (deweyan) *practical* turn.

The James-Dewey challenge:

At the first stage, the pragmatist challenges the scholastic to show how answers to the questions he pursues would make a difference.

In response, the scholastic maintains that these answers provide important clarifications, delivering cognitive benefits which, although not evidently yielding increased powers of intervention in nature, are to be valued for their own sake.

The pragmatist now asks whether this style of clarification can take priority over other investigations that might matter to people: does the current lack of clarity make itself felt in the lives of nonspecialists? Does it interfere with projects that might address issues of concern to many? (Kitcher, 2012, introduction, s. 3))

V. Kitcher's (deweyan) *practical* turn.

For Kitcher, this challenge is not a knock down argument. But is only aimed at starting a critical dialogue with those that arise suspicions of sterile scholasticism. Such as “Professional Anglophone philosophy, both in Dewey’s time and in ours.” (*Ibid.*, s. 3)

This, in turn, for Kitcher, is to be put together with Dewey’s deliberative and democratic ethics.

V. Kitcher's (deweyan) *practical* turn.

Kitcher's reading of Dewey:

- 1) The need for a *practical* criticism of Philosophy.
- 2) Philosophy as a crossroad of disciplines: "Philosophy is not a discipline for those who are proud to know nothing, but is for people who aspire to know something of everything, so that they can propose a broader perspective." (Idem, s. 6)
- 3) Philosophy *as* educational and road-clearer for inquiry: Philosophy does theory to "disentangle the pictures of the world and our relation to it that would accord with our best scientific understanding from the excrescences of over-ambitious philosophy." (idem, s. 6)

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

Recently, Björn Ramberg (2018), one of the first proposers of “Pragmatic Naturalism” (2004) as a current trend inspired by Rorty, has classified three trends or moments in its development:

1. Deconstructionist Pragmatic Naturalism (DPN) (Rorty)
2. Theoretical Pragmatic Naturalism (TPN) (Price, Brandom)
3. Confrontative Pragmatic Naturalism (CPN) (Kitcher)

Briefly, for Ramberg, only the confrontative strain can succeed in bringing about a *Reconstruction in Philosophy* today. Simply because while *DPN* is a radical critique, it is external. While *TPN* is internal, it is not radical *enough*. And *CPN* is radical *and* internal because it aims not at philosophical commitments, but to the civic duties of inquirers.

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

I'd like to argue here for a synthesis of the three branches (or tactics) under the umbrella of *CPN*.

Kitcher's response to this is *not* to construct an argument that will lead step-by-step from wasteful metaphysics to meaningful project. Nor is it to deconstruct the offending activities by undercutting their self-understanding. His response is rather to remind us of our *civic obligations*; to justify what we do as being of some significance, in a wide, idealized community of deliberation. (Ramberg, 2018, 324)

What if, instead of asking ourselves what philosophy should be, what we philosophers should be working on, we were to ask ourselves; how do we maximize the chances that philosophers spend their time on useful things? (*Ibid.*, p. 325)

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

I'd like to argue here for a synthesis of the three branches (or tactics) under the umbrella of *CPN*.

I take from Ramberg the need to link metaphilosophical questions about *method* to *ethical* questions about *aim* (Ramberg, 2018, 318). In this sense, Ramberg's proposal would amount to take not either a metaphilosophical stance or a *moral* stance (in terms of Rorty's account of metaphilosophy), but *both* at the same time.

Also, the idea that *Theoretical Pragmatic Naturalism* cannot offer a road-map for Philosophy but only to emphasize the open-endedness of philosophical practice.

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

But *Theoretical Pragmatic Naturalism* can play another role, one that Kitcher highlights:

Metaphysical accounts of truth and reality are required only to free us from confusions about what we are doing, and to focus our attention on our goals and the strategies for achieving them. The marriage of realism and pragmatism envisaged here is, I suggest, metaphysics enough. (2012, p. 144)

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

Only as science is seen to be fulfilled and brought to itself in intelligent management of historical processes in their continuity can man be envisaged as within nature, and not as a supernatural extrapolation.
(...)

While the humanizing of science contributes to the life of humanity, it is even more required in behalf of science, in order that it may be intelligible, simple and clear; in order that it may have that correspondence with reality which true knowledge claims for itself. (Dewey, 1958, pp. 163-165)

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

Theoretical syntheses and the kind of genealogical explanation that *TPN* recommends can play an educational and road-clearing role in the scope of a broader *moral* critique of Philosophy. Offering pragmatic naturalistic “narratives” that free us from the grasp of metaphysical excesses can help not-pragmatist philosophers to jump on board and lend a hand.

Two notes might be useful:

- 1) Rorty’s idea that only by offering alternative narratives can we hope to convince others to abandon theirs. It’s useful to offer something in return.
- 2) The useful role that naturalistic narratives have played in some debates. For instance Dennett in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* against what he considered excesses in anti-darwinist speculation in some philosophical debates.

VI. A comprehensive Pragmatic Naturalism

Pragmatic Naturalist theoretical accounts or narratives, that are *metaphysically quietist*, of the role of Philosophy can play a role in a broader political argument against the scholastic state of some disputes.

Keeping the metaphilosophical conversation alive *while* we make appeals to practice, or *denouncements* of practice, to our colleagues is, I think, a coherent way of seeing a conversational starting point for the pragmatically inclined philosopher in the current wake of interest for naturalism.

VII. Peirce and Dewey

To close this presentation, I want to stress the importance of reviving not only Dewey's idea of Philosophy as a General Theory of Education (as Kitcher does) as a model of inspiration, but also the practical maxims that Peirce postulated for successful inquiry:

- 1) In order to learn you must desire to learn!
- 2) Do not block the road of inquiry! (CP 1.135)

VII. Peirce and Dewey

The constant reminder of the possibility of Philosophy lapsing into dogmatic or sterile discussions that impede the progress of inquiry was seen, by Peirce, as extremely important. His theory of abduction goes hand in hand with these maxims and his description of the scientific attitude in normative terms. So, I want to stress, Pragmatism should keep its foundational balancing act between rigorous theorycrafting, interdisciplinary curiosity, and ethical critique in order to enhance the historical process of inquiry. This, I think, is the best lesson we can take from Charles Darwin in Philosophy.

VII. Peirce, Dewey and Darwin.

When we no longer look at an organic being as a savage looks at a ship, as at something wholly beyond his comprehension; when we regard every production of nature as one which has had a history; when we contemplate every complex structure and instinct as the summing up of many contrivances, each useful to the possessor, nearly in the same way as when we look at any great mechanical invention as the summing up of the labour, the experience, the reason, and even the blunders of numerous workmen; when we thus view each organic being, how far more interesting, I speak from experience, will the study of natural history become! (Darwin, [1859], 1964, p. 485)