

PRAGMATISM

An Open Question

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Contents

Hilary Putnam	ix
Preface	xi
Introductory Remarks	1
1 The Permanence of William James	5
2 Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?	27
3 Pragmatism and the Contemporary Debate	57
Bibliography of the Writings of Hilary Putnam	82
Index	103

Introductory Remarks

Today we tend to take the ideas of tolerance and pluralism for granted. If we are aware that there was diversity of views and the clash of different opinions in ancient Athens, for example, or in the late Roman empire, we are likely to regard that activity as a sign of vitality in those societies. Few people realize that that is not how those societies themselves saw the matter. Classical thinkers saw diversity of opinions as a sign of decay and heresy; only since the Enlightenment have we been able to see it as a positive good. One author¹ has suggested that it is only when society came to be held together “through an alliance of enlightened self interest, rather than through shared moral and religious beliefs” that “the flourishing of diversity and pluralism, which in the past have existed only as a by-product and symptom of political decline, could be embraced for the first time as a form of social health.” While this author exaggerates – modern liberal states are still held together by sentiment and tradition as well as by self interest, enlightened or not so enlightened – and while he fails to see that the belief in tolerance is itself a “shared moral belief”, and a most important one,

it is true that modern societies are not held together by a single shared comprehensive world view. They are not held together by any one religion, and if there are still shared moral beliefs, there are no *unchallenged* moral beliefs. Moreover, except for a minority of reactionaries, we do not wish that our societies should be held together by unquestioned systems of moral and religious belief. We value our freedom to choose our own “destinies” (to use a term suggested by Agnes Heller²), where that freedom is understood as not merely the freedom to choose a trade or profession, but also as the freedom to decide for oneself regarding values, goals, concrete norms, and even, to a certain extent, mores.

What we call the Enlightenment was in large part an intellectual movement devoted to providing a rationale for this kind of “open society”; it was not only a political and historical rationale, but also an epistemological rationale, one which included “arguments about the uncertainty of our moral and religious knowledge.”³ And the problems generated by the Enlightenment are still our problems; we value the tolerance and pluralism, but we are troubled by the epistemological scepticism that came with that tolerance and pluralism.

I remind you of all this, because the issues that I will be discussing are not just theoretical issues. It is an open question whether an enlightened society can avoid a corrosive moral scepticism without tumbling back into moral authoritarianism. And it is precisely this question that has led me, in recent years, back to pragmatism – to the writings of Peirce, and James and Dewey, and also to the writings of Wittgenstein, whose work, I shall argue in these lectures, bears affinities to American Pragmatism even if he was not willing to be classed as a “pragmatist”.

In the first of the lectures that follow, I try to explain

the importance of the thought of William James, focussing in particular on the way in which fact and value are seen as inseparable by James, but also setting the stage for the discussion of the inseparability of fact and theory and fact and interpretation in the lectures which follow. In the second lecture, I try to situate the later philosophy of Wittgenstein not only with respect to pragmatism, but also with respect to the history of philosophy, and in the third and final lecture I try to bring the legacy of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Wittgenstein to bear on some of our contemporary philosophical debates. In particular, I hope to convince you that pragmatism offers something far better than the unpalatable alternatives which too often seem to be the only possibilities today, both philosophically and politically.

Notes

- 1 Arthur M. Melzer. See his “Tolerance 101,” in *The New Republic*, June 1991.
- 2 See her *A Philosophy of Morals* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
- 3 Melzer, pp. 11–12.