A few years ago, Alan Sica invited me to write a review essay for Contemporary Sociology. The subject was open. I decided to write on the Critical Realism of Roy Bhaskar. The article was entitled “What is Critical Realism? And why should you care?”

A few days after it appeared, Kieran Healey tweeted out his answer to my questions. Roughly: “It’s bollocks, and you shouldn’t care.” Fabio Rojas then posted Healey’s tweets to the orgtheory blog, along with some more polemical thrusts.

George Steinmetz, Chris Smith and I decided to respond in the comments section of the blog. Three days of vigorous online debate ensued. Several of our on- and offline interchanges were with self-proclaimed neo-pragmatists. While they were often sympathetic to our complaints about the baneful impact of logical positivism on American sociology, they were quite resistant to the Critical Realist concern with social ontology. Invoking Dewey and Rorty, but also Peirce and James, they argued that our concern with metaphysics was tantamount to “foundationalism”, and that the pragmatists had rightly urged us to turn our backs on such questions, because they are inherently insoluble. What is more, they claimed, pragmatism also provides good grounds for
rejecting realism of any kind. (Nor was this an altogether anomalous viewpoint. I have heard similar objections in subsequent conversations with sociological pragmatists since then.)

Having spent much of the preceding summer working through much of John Dewey’s immense oeuvre, I was initially somewhat puzzled by this reaction. Wasn’t Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* – the book many Dewey scholars regard as his chef d’oeuvre – basically a treatise on metaphysics, I wondered? What about William James’ *A Plural Universe*? Wasn’t that also an essay on ontology? Hadn’t Sidney Hook written his dissertation on pragmatist metaphysics?

The claim that pragmatism was at odds with realism also struck me as odd. I had never made a serious study of Rorty’s writings. But I had read a great deal of Hilary Putnam’s work during the mid-1990s, during his “internal realism” phase and then again a few years ago, following his recent embrace of “natural realism”, a phrase borrowed from William James. Of course, Putnam was famous – notorious even – for changing his mind over the years. But one constant was – and is – his unrelenting embrace of the realist label.

I decided to use *this* essay to revisit the question of pragmatism and metaphysics. Here’s what I found on closer inspection: 1) Dewey was trying to reconstruct metaphysics, not scuttle it; 2) Putnam’s “natural realism” was inspired by James and Dewey; 3) Neopragmatists have overemphasized the antifoundationalism of the classical pragmatists at
the expense of their holism. 4) Non-
\textit{rortysant} pragmatism is quite close to Critical Realism on most crucial points.

In what follows, I will focus my attention on Rorty’s greatest philosophical hero – John Dewey – and on his closest intellectual rival – Hilary Putnam – paying particular attention to Dewey’s \textit{Experience and Nature} and Putnam’s writings on realism. If my reading of them is right, then the radical Rortyan reading of pragmatism is wrong, as is the anti-realism of Rortyan neo-pragmatists in American sociology. Whether the radical reading of Rorty is the right one, and whether it has been the most influential one in our discipline, remains an open question for me, if not a particularly pressing one.

\textbf{DEWEY’S METAPHYSICS}

In \textit{Consequences of Pragmatism}, Rorty argues that Dewey’s foray into metaphysics was a mistake and an aberration that Dewey himself eventually came to regret. It was a mistake because metaphysics itself is a mistake, a set of questions that we should simply walk away from. It was an aberration because it is at odds with the therapeutic and deconstructive thrust of the rest of Dewey’s work. As evidence of regret, Rorty cites Dewey’s response to a 1948 review article criticizing his metaphysics.

In that response, Dewey does indeed say the following:
I now realize that it was exceedingly naïve of me to suppose that it was possible to rescue the word [metaphysics] from its deeply engrained traditional use. I derive what consolation may be possible from promising myself never to use the words again in connection with any aspect of any part of my own position.¹

Presumably, this is the passage that Rorty has in mind. But Rorty is notorious for cherry-picking phrases and citing them out of context. And, indeed, Dewey immediately goes on to insist that the “natural world has *generic* as well as specific traits” that can be identified through “experience” and that these generic traits are the “genuine subject matter” of metaphysics and that “experience” is its method. He closes the comment by reassuring the reader that “the foregoing is not an apology for my use of the world ‘metaphysical’.” What is more, Dewey continues to use the word “metaphysics” in subsequent work and, more importantly, to reflect on metaphysical questions until the end of his life.²

Following his usual argumentative practice, Dewey typically presented his metaphysical views as a synthesis of two antithetical views. (Here, as elsewhere, we see the “permanent deposit” of Hegel’s logic in Dewey’s method.) One way in which Dewey’s metaphysics can be understood is an attempt to overcome the age-old opposition between monism and dualism. In a 1922 exchange with Arthur O. Lovejoy, one of the American Critical Realists, Dewey advocated for a “realism without monism or dualism.” By monism, Dewey meant the view that reality is composed of, and reducible to, one basic sort of matter. Within Western philosophy, this view probably originates with the
Greek and Roman atomists (e.g., Epicurus and Lucretius), was later revived by early modern neo-Epicureans (e.g., Hobbes and Spinoza) and still survives in reductionistic forms of scientific materialism. By dualism, Dewey meant the view that the world is comprised of two radically different types of substance, such as form and matter (Plato), body and soul (Augustine) or mind and matter (Descartes). Dualism survives in theology but has few advocates within philosophy today. Dewey’s proposed via media is “pluralistic realism”: “Things are things, not mental states. Hence the realism. But the things are indefinitely many. Hence the pluralism.” In other words, there is a “mind-independent reality” – the fundamental tenet of all realisms. However, that reality cannot be understood in purely atomistic terms. – but that reality cannot be exhaustively described in physical terms, because this leaves no room for qualitative experience. As Dewey puts it:

“It is as ‘much a part of the real being of atoms that they give rise in time, under increasing complication of relationships, to qualities of blue and sweet, pain and beauty, as that they have at a cross-section of time extension, mass, or weight.’” In other words, secondary qualities are every bit as “real” and “natural” as primary ones.

In *Experience and Nature*, the main target of Dewey’s critique is atomism. Dewey’s principal objection is that atomism leaves no room for qualitative experience:

*Experience and Nature* also takes aim at dualistic systems that dig a deep divide between mind and world. For Dewey, mind and world are in continuous transaction, and it is these transactions, rather than people’s thoughts, which
constitute “experience.” To paraphrase Putnam, experience “ain’t in the head”; it’s in “nature.” So much so, that for Dewey mind is not even a necessary condition of “experience.” As he puts it:

“Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are how things are experienced as well.”

Another way of reading Dewey’s metaphysics is as an attempt to transcend the modern opposition between idealism and materialism. A later dispute provided Dewey with the opportunity to spell out his critique of idealism in greater detail. Some historical background will help elucidate the stakes. In 1930, Robert Hutchins, the Wunderkind president of the University of Chicago, appointed the neo-Thomist philosopher, Mortimer J. Adler, to a post in the Law School, against the strenuous objections of the Philosophy Department, which then included George Herbert Mead and Dewey protégé, James Tufts. Once in Hyde Park, Adler quickly gained Hutchins ear. Hutchins was contemplating a major reform of undergraduate education and Adler persuaded him to institute a core curriculum that would teach the “great books” by means of the Socratic method. In 1936, Hutchins published The Higher Learning in America, an eloquent plea for a fundamental reorganization of the university that would integrate specialized fields of study beneath the umbrella of a separate department of metaphysics.
Dewey responded with a forceful rebuttal of the plan in *The Social Frontier* in which he described Hutchins’ metaphysics as medieval and denounced his plan as soft fascism. Hutchins (rightly) retorted that Dewey was mischaracterizing his views. A yearlong exchange ensued.

The dispute flared again in 1943 when Adler delivered a lecture on “God and the Professors” in which he turned the tables on Dewey, charging that:

the most serious threat to Democracy is the positivism of the professors…Democracy has more to fear from the mentality of its teachers than from the nihilism of Hitler. It is the same nihilism in both cases, but Hitler’s is more honest and consistent….

But what did this have to do with Dewey? Positivism was being indicted, not pragmatism, after all. But things were not so simple. Members of the original Vienna Circle began arriving in the United States during the early 1930s and soon began to court Dewey, who was, after all, America’s leading philosopher at the time. In the wake of his original exchange with Hutchins, Dewey and his allies threw their lot in with Carnap and Neurath and joined the “Unity of Science Movement.” Thus, Adler’s salvo was directed at the pragmatists, too. Positivists and pragmatists closed ranks and returned fire in a special issue of *Partisan Review*. Dewey’s attacks on the revival of “medieval scholasticism” would continue until the end of his life and often veered into intemperate polemics.
against organized religion more generally. It is against this back that the 1948 remark quoted by Rorty must be understood.

The debate with Hutchins and Adler allowed Dewey to clarify his views concerning metaphysics and its relationship to religion, science, and ethics. For Adler, at least, the interrelationship between these fields was crystal clear. Metaphysics is “first philosophy” derived from a priori reasoning. As such it is “superior to science, both theoretically and practically.” Metaphysics is also able to prove “the existence of supra-sensible being” including “the existence of God. As for science, it “can give us only a control over operable means”; it can tell us nothing whatsoever about human ends. Together, metaphysics and religion provide the framework of ethics and therefore of politics.

Dewey’s position was diametrically opposed to Adler’s on each and every point. For Dewey, metaphysics was a form of second-order reflection based on experience. As such, it was intimately connected to science though not exhausted science is based on experience but is not the whole of experience. Of course, for Dewey, the realm of experience also includes “the religious.” For Dewey, religious experience is not a monopoly of organized religion; indeed, on his view, organized religion often stifles religious experience. By “religious experience”, Dewey understands all experiences of “consummation” and unity, in which the ideal can be glimpsed in the actual, whether in a piece of art, a piece of writing or
a piece of furniture. Nor can science and ethics be separated, any more than means and ends can. Dewey was a “holist.” No sharp line can be drawn between science and ethics or, for that matter, between metaphysics and politics. As such, he believed that the methods of science, broadly construed as “inquiry”, could also be applied to the realm of ethics and, of course, of politics as well. In sum, Dewey was not dismissing metaphysics as such; rather, he was dismissing metaphysics as Adler defined it: as a first philosophy prior to science that claimed to demonstrate the existence of a supersensible realm that was beyond all experience. If that is metaphysics, the Dewey wants nothing to do with it.

Despite their common opposition to the neo-Thomist revival, positivists and pragmatists made strange bedfellows. Most of the positivists opposed the rationalist idealism of Adler and Hutchins from the perspective of a thoroughgoing scientific materialism of a reductionist sort. But Dewey was seeking a middle way between materialism and idealism, one that would affirm the reality of quality but root quality in nature. In a 1945 exchange with W.H. Sheldon in the *Journal of Philosophy* Dewey joined with Hook and Nagel to defend a non-reductive materialism. Anticipating debates about the philosophy of mind that continue into the present-day, they parse the question of whether mental states can be reduced to physical ones, i.e., whether pain can be precisely described in physico-chemical terms. After conceding that a final answer to this question must await further research, they place their bets on emergentism, i.e., on the notion that an structured
whole may have powers and properties not possessed by its constituent elements. To be sure, they do not explicitly use the term emergence, but they do use the associated vocabulary of ontological levels, functional wholes, causal powers, organized structures and so on. This allowed them to understand “mind” as emergent from biological nature and “experience” as emergent from mind’s interactions with physical nature.

Where Dewey parted ways with the positivists, and presumably also with Nagel, was his epistemology. While pragmatists and positivists certainly agreed that scientific method was the surest route to useful knowledge, Deweyan pragmatists understood scientific method in much broader and looser terms than the positivists did. Where the positivists tried – unsuccessfully it must be stressed – to reduce method to logic, Dewey always rooted method in practice. What is more, Dewey’s notion of “inquiry” went well beyond anything that could reasonably be called “science.” It included disciplined knowledge practices of all kinds – “the arts” in the classical sense. This was perhaps the central point of *Art as Experience*, which followed immediately on *Experience and Nature*.

In sum, Rorty’s claim that Dewey’s exasperated pledge to avoid the term “metaphysics” is best understood as a rejection of the sort of a priorist, rationalist metaphysics advocated by neo-Thomists and paleo-Aristotelians like Adler and Hutchinson, rather than of metaphysics *tout court*. On the contrary, to the end,
Dewey was dedicated to showing that his “democratic faith” and ethics of personal growth were aligned with the grain of the universe.

PUTNAM’S REALISM

As some readers may have already guessed, the title of this paper is an allusion to Hilary Putnam’s 2004 book, *Ethics without Ontology*. As if the title were not clear enough, Putnam concludes the first part of the book with a chapter entitled “Ontology: an Obituary.” There, he (once again) disowns the “Metaphysical Realism” he had so vigorously championed early in his career. He does so in the name of his three philosophical “heroes”: Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey, having discovered the latter in the 1990s. Was Putnam simply following in Rorty’s footsteps, turning his back on metaphysics and realism, after running into Dewey? Let’s have a closer look.

Putnam’s intellectual trajectory is conventionally divided into three phases. But let’s start with the prologue, instead of ending with it, a la Star Wars. Following undergraduate studies in Philosophy and Mathematics at Penn, Putnam entered the PhD program in philosophy at UCLA. His thesis advisor there was none other than Hans Reichenbach, the founder of the “Berlin Circle” and a central figure in logical positivism and the Unity of Science movement. Putnam’s early work was in the philosophy of mathematics. He wrote his dissertation on the theory of probability.
Putnam penned his declaration of intellectual independence a few years later, when he publicly repudiated logical positivism. During this period, he embraced what he would later denounce as “Metaphysical Realism.” Specifically, he advocated an inflationary version of scientific realism. Following Plato in the Phaedrus, Putnam argued that science could “carve nature at its joints.” Inspired by Quine, he also concluded that numbers and other mathematical objects are every bit as real as electrons and blood cells. If the theoretical entities of modern physics were real, he reasoned, weren’t the mathematical entities required to describe them also real? In phase one, then, Putnam was engaged in a program of “ontological inflation.”

In the second phase, Putnam rejected his phase-one version of “Metaphysical Realism” in favor of a new theory of “internal realism.” This phase coincides with a serious engagement with Kant and Wittgenstein. Putnam argued that Metaphysical Realism was premised on a correspondence theory of truth. More specifically, it assumed that: 1) reality consists of a fixed and finite set of mind-independent entities; 2) scientific concepts map onto these entities in a determinate fashion; 3) a true scientific theory is one that pictures or mirrors the world; 4) hence, there must principle be one true theory of the world, supplied by science, towards which rival theories eventually converge. Here, Putnam sounds like Peirce, who claimed to have learned his pragmatism from Kant.

Putnam’s new theory of internal realism was based on an epistemic theory of truth. It assumed that: 1) reality can be carved up in different ways; 2) the carving directions are contained in “conceptual schemas”, which are at least partly premised on social
convention; 3) a theory is true if and to the degree that it is both coherent and useful in a particular context; 4) hence, there cannot be one true theory of the world, even in principle, and no reason to expect theoretical convergence.

Let’s unpack Putnam’s argument just a bit more. The case for internal realism pivoted on the second point: our knowledge of the world is always mediated by systems of concepts. And conceptual schemas are like natural languages: they are arbitrary systems of signs that are fixed by social convention. This implies that the same physical system can therefore be described with different conceptual schema. That this is true in principle, Putnam demonstrated via model theory. That this is true in practice, he showed with reference to quantum physics. Of course, this does not mean that all schema are equally true. A true theory will also afford some control over the physical system in question. Control provides another criterion of truth. So, truth is partly “internal” to a theory, but it is also a function of “reality.” Whence Putnam’s moniker of “internal realism.”

In the third phase, Putnam rejects internal realism in favor of what he variously calls “natural”, “commonsense” or “practical.” This third phase coincides with a deepening engagement with pragmatism and also with a widening of philosophical interests in the direction of ethics, politics and religion. Like all epistemic theories, Putnam’s internal realism had injected an “interface” between mind and world, an interface both conceptual and linguistic. Putnam came to believe that this was a mistake, that our access to, and interaction with, the world is much more direct than the interface model implies. This is especially true if we take everyday life as our starting point, instead of scientific
experimentation, as classical epistemology does. In place of his epistemic theory of internal realism, Putnam now advanced a pragmatic version of “natural realism.” The pragmatism in question is James’ and, even more, Dewey’s. From James, Putnam borrows the phrase, “natural realism.” By this, James meant a “belief in extra-mental facts”, in “real things, objective in both the epistemological and the physical sense” (TCW, II, 332). Like James’, Putnam’s new realism attempts to do justice to the everyday experience of the common person. Like Dewey, however, Putnam insists that “experience” be understood in a way that encompasses the full range of experience, not only the experience nor just the reality of physical objects. Instead, he understood “practical” in a pre-pragmatic sense that encompasses ethical and political truths, and not just “action.”

With this “second naivete”, Putnam moves very close to Critical Realism, which insists that our experience is of the world and not just of descriptions of the world. He also echoes the late Wittgenstein’s famous call: “to the things themselves!”

**CONTEMPORARY PRAGMATISM AND CRITICAL REALISM**

There has been a good deal of mutual suspicion between contemporary pragmatism and critical realism. The principle source of the suspicion, I believe, has been the Rortyan interpretation of classical pragmatism, which has led to a knee-jerk aversion to ontology amongst contemporary pragmatists and to a knee-jerk counter-aversion to pragmatism amongst contemporary realists. But if the Rortyan interpretation of classical pragmatism is fundamentally incorrect – and I believe it is – and if there is actually a
good deal of agreement between the two movements – as I think there is -- then this opens a space for dialogue.

Meaningful dialogue presumes some level of basic agreement. And non-rortysant pragmatists and Critical Realists do in fact agree on a number of important issues. I have already touched on two: 1) an understanding of metaphysics as a process of second-order reflection that is grounded in experience; 2) a realist epistemology that accepts the existence of a mind-independent world of objects and power. Now let me point to a third area of agreement that is particularly germane to the present panel. Classical Pragmatists and Critical Realists both reject the hoary distinction between facts and values in favor of some form of ethical naturalism. Specifically, many non-Rortyan pragmatists and Critical Realists are drawn to some version of neo-Aristotelean ethics. While Dewey rejects any fixed and final account of the human good or the human telos, he champions human growth and democratic faith, echoing Aristotle’s insistence that ethics and politics cannot be sundered from one another. Putnam has repeatedly inveighed against the fact/value distinction and his ethical writings are likewise rife with references to Aristotelian ethics and, in particular, to the “human capabilities” approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum. Though Bhaskar never authored a text on ethics, the Aristotelian principle of “human flourishing” is peppered throughout his oeuvre. And Andrew Sayer’s recent book, *Why Things Matter to People*, draws heavily on the work of neo-Aristotelian philosophes such as Philippa Foote and Richard Kraut, to argue against the value-neutrality principle in social science. These examples could easily be multiplied.

What might contemporary pragmatism learn from Critical Realism? Above all, a new way of ontology. While most pragmatists are not as hostile to metaphysics as Rorty
is, they are more ambivalent about it than most Critical Realists are, and this has
sometimes hindered their efforts at reconstruction. Consider Dewey’s *Experience and
Nature* once again. Dewey is anxious to erase the various “dualisms” that arise out of
classical and Christian metaphysics, such as mind and body or natural and supernatural.
He achieves this by inflating the categories of “experience” and “nature” – and
obliterating all distinctions within and between them. Dewey’s insistence that experience
is not exhausted by science and that it incorporates non-human elements seems useful.
Dewey’s implication that experience is part of nature and need not involve humans just
seems confused. Similarly, Dewey’s insistence that nature encompasses qualities and
values seems helpful. But his efforts to dispense with distinctions between the physical,
biological and social seems willful.

Pragmatist metaphysics could profit from a fuller engagement with the Critical
Realist theory of emergence. Critical Realists distinguish between diachronic and
synchronic forms of emergence. Diachronic emergence refers to the temporal emergence
of new kinds of entities and powers, be they physical, biological, cultural or whatever.
From this perspective, “experience” emerges alongside sentient life, with its powers of
perception and learning. In *Experience and Nature*, with all its talk of novelty and
openness, Dewey is continually groping his way towards the notion of diachronic
emergence. Synchronic emergence refers to the ontological emergence of causal powers
out of organized structures, be they physical, biological, social or whatever. The late
eyssay on the philosophy of mind that Dewey authored with Hook and Nagel contains all
the vocabulary of emergentism except for the word “emergence.” Had Dewey completed
a third revision of *Experience and Nature*, this new emphasis on emergence would have
allowed him to provide a more coherent account of qualitative human experience and authorized working distinctions between various ontological levels and domains, with their corresponding forms of inquiry.

What Critical Realism might learn from contemporary pragmatism? One thing that I have learned from this reengagement with Dewey is that philosophical realists tend to overprivilege scientific experience. Dewey’s insistence that scientific knowledge is not the only medium through which nature discloses itself seems fundamentally correct to me. But perhaps some of you can help me to complete that thought.

SOCIOLOGY WITHOUT ETHICS?

Following Rorty, neo-pragmatists often stress the anti-foundationalism of their founding fathers. Of course, the anti-foundationalist reading of classical pragmatism is not wrong, but it is overdone. Dewey did in fact reject “metaphysics” in the sense of a “first philosophy” prior to empirical inquiry, as did Peirce and James before him. But they all practiced metaphysics in the sense of second-order reflection on the “generic traits of existence.” In christening themselves “the Metaphysical Club”, I suspect they were expressing ambivalence as much as scorn, a desire to reground metaphysics rather than dismantling it.

In my view, the antifoundationalist reading is also somewhat onesided. For there is another aspect of the pragmatist approach that receives less emphasis in rortysant accounts: its holism. By “holism”, I mean a unifying approach to philosophy that is
grounded on a naturalistic understanding of the world. On this understanding, no sharp line can be drawn between the various branches of philosophy – e.g., metaphysics, ethics and politics – and all can and should be studied in the same way – viz., through disciplined “inquiry.” For the holist, ethics can and should be just as much an object for “inquiry” as physics, even if the appropriate methods and evidence may be different. There is a deep tension between these two sides of the pragmatist program. Why? A radical anti-foundationalism of the *rortysant* sort leads to a strong form of moral relativism. Morality and ethics are unmoored from the traditional supports – human nature, divine command, self-interest or whatever. They are tethered only by shared culture and group solidarity – by the stories we tell about ourselves. An ethic of radical autonomy and self-creation is limited, if at all, by a desire for meaning and fellow feeling.

Of course, for many neo-pragmatists this tonic of relativism and tribalism may be a feature – I suspect it is the main attraction for some. But for Dewey and Putnam, at least, it is most definitely a bug – I suspect is one of the main reasons that Dewey and Putnam refused to let go of metaphysics and realism: they are both committed to some form of ethical naturalism. And ethical naturalism must be anchored in some view of human purpose or human flourishing. In Dewey’s case, the purpose is “growth.” For Putnam, it is the development of “human capacities.” In both cases, their views of how human beings ought to live is explicitly connected to their understanding how the world is. For Dewey, human growth is an aspect of natural growth. For Putnam, human capacities are rooted in our biological nature. Accordingly, both Dewey and Putnam repeatedly and vehemently rejected any sharp distinction between facts and values.
I suspect that this is one of the reasons why many sociological pragmatists are more attracted to Rorty than Putnam and to Rorty’s reading of Dewey than a correct reading of Dewey. A fuller and more accurate appropriation of the pragmatist tradition would pose a major challenge to the value-free ethic that dominates in the more professional domains of the discipline and also to the ethics of individual autonomy and multiculturalism that dominates in its more politicized precincts.

What would a fuller embrace of the holist principle mean for American sociology? Would it require the creation of a new ASA section on the sociology of imposing our views on everyone else? Not at all. Pragmatist holism is not a monistic holism; rather, it involves a deep pluralism in which various goods must be balanced, the good must be balanced against the just and the prudent, amongst other things, and many voices must be heard. At the moment, the only voices being heard from the social sciences are the utilitarian cries of our economist colleagues.


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2 There are numerous references to and extensive discussions of metaphysics in Dewey’s last (and, until recently, lost) book, for example. _Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy_ (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2012).
3 Dewey, _MW_, vol. 13, 55.
4 This is one of the central points of John Dewey, _Art as Experience_ (Penguin, 2005).