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"Pragmatist Perspectives"

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REFERENCES

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- 1 The present volume is a collection of the papers presented at the First Nordic Pragmatism Conference, Pragmatism in Science, Religion, and Politics, organized in Helsinki by the Nordic Pragmatism Network (nordprag.org), the Philosophical Society of Finland, the Department of Philosophy at the University of Helsinki, and the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, in June 2008.
- 2 The overall picture that can be drawn from reading the book testifies to both the richness and the quality of the second wave Scandinavian scholarship. As Sami Pihlström proudly points out in his opening contribution to the volume, Nordic Pragmatism is no longer just a provincial movement, but it is widely acknowledged as a respected voice in the pragmatist debate, as is witnessed by the presence of several foreign scholars (actually, almost half of the contributors work outside of Scandinavian Universities). Its international character marks a strong difference between the contemporary interest in pragmatism and the early 20th century involvement in it, which was a rather superficial and peripheral phenomenon, mainly concerned with the reception of some themes of James' pragmatist philosophy of religion. Thanks to the rise of the neopragmatist movement, pragmatism has progressively expanded to become not only a subject matter of both theoretical and historical inquiry, but also a conceptual framework shared by a great number of philosophers with different

interests and points of view. Accordingly, it might be held that the single distinctive trait of Scandinavian Pragmatism amounts to the conviction that pragmatism is a philosophical perspective whose exploitation can be fruitful.

- 3 Therefore, the title *Pragmatist Perspectives* turns out to be a fit description of both the Nordic Pragmatist Movement and of the present book. Pihlström observes that "at least these key topics of pragmatist philosophy – social theory, communication, religion – are well and alive in Scandinavia. Philosophy of science has not been forgotten [...]. Also, dissertations and other works on Rorty's radical neopragmatism have been and are being written" (22). And this is precisely what can be found in the three sections that constitute the volume. The first one, "Pragmatism, Early and Late," collects essays dealing with manifold topics, ranging from the relation between classical pragmatists and Hegel (D. Anderson) to the pragmatist philosophy of technology and inquiry (L. Hickman and Vuorio; Rydenfelt). Other essays are devoted to discussing pragmatic naturalism (J. Shook), Rorty's utopian political philosophy (A. Kremer), and the history of Nordic pragmatism (S. Pihlström).
- 4 The second section is entitled "Pragmatism, Ethics, and Society," and it is more homogeneous than the first, revolving around the new conception of activity that was endorsed by pragmatists. Whereas some contributions tackle the theoretical questions of the nature of action and normativity (E. Kilpinen, E. Višnovský) and of the distinction between facts and values (I. Niiniluoto), practical issues are discussed at some length too: the moral problem of whether it can be maintained that nature has some intrinsic values (J. Welchman), the socio-pedagogical account of subjectivity provided by Dewey and Mead (A. Sutinen, A. Gronow) and the idea of radical action (that is, "acting so as to show opposition or hostility toward governmental or corporate plans and decisions," 211) in Dewey's political philosophy (Ólafsson). Strangely enough, there is no contribution explicitly addressing the issues concerning the pragmatist philosophy of psychology.
- 5 Finally, the third section, "Pragmatism and Religion," deals with the pragmatist approach to religious phenomena. As is well known, from the very beginning of its history pragmatism has been deeply interested in the philosophy of religion. Both Peirce and James believed that religious experience has to be taken into account by a full-fledged pragmatist philosophy. In particular, William James' version of pragmatism has usually been read as a vindication of our religious beliefs. However, it seems much more difficult to find a religious concern in the second-generation pragmatists (Dewey, Mead, Tufts, and, partially, Santayana). The reason is that they gave a naturalistic turn to pragmatism, so that they were much less interested in the relevance of religious experiences for philosophy than they were in establishing a full-fledged biological theory of mental activity. One might even say that the possibility of accounting for religious phenomena was sacrificed on the altar of a radical naturalism. The contributors of the present volume take up this challenge and try to outline a naturalistic theory of religion, weighing its pros and cons. The section is composed of an overview of pragmatists' approach to religious questions (J. Campbell), a general discussion concerning the availability of a religious reading of John Dewey's *A Common Faith* (M. Eldridge), and a radical redescription of what faith is, if seen from a naturalistic point of view (L. Bugaeva and J. Ryder). The two remaining contributions are slightly different from the rest, lying on the margins of the pragmatic tradition. The first one, whose authors are L. Haaparanta and H. J. Koskinen, proposes an analysis

of religious belief, stressing that a correct analysis of it "should [...] be able to function as an instrument of self-understanding for the believer" (261). In brief, the main theses of the essays are three: i) religious language is specifically different from the language of science and common sense; "our epistemic route to the world of religion is built on the religious practice" (267); "some beliefs that a religious believer holds can be supported by arguments inside the worldview" (262). The second one, written by E. Herrmann, also endorses an internal realist perspective on truth and reality and, from this point of view, it discusses the clash so typical of the contemporary world between religion and the sciences. Since truth is not a metaphysical property of correspondence of ideas to reality, but a general feature of our practices of living in the world, religion and science can both be true. "Science provides us with knowledge of how reality offers us resistance in empirical regards [...]. Religions and secular ideologies provide us with rituals, images and narratives for conceptualizing [...] what is intellectually incomprehensible" (272).

- 6 Since it is obviously not possible – and it would not be even particularly useful – to give a detailed account of every single essay, I prefer to highlight the two strains of thought which I believe are most worthy of attention, because of their relevance to the contemporary debate: the pragmatist naturalism and the pragmatist theory of action. Taken together, they supply a reliable view of what I judge to be the most original trends happening in the present book and, insofar as it can be taken to be representative of the whole movement, in Scandinavian pragmatism as well. The two aspects are deeply interwoven, because the general theory of action relies on metaphysics. For the sake of convenience, I will start discussing the latter, and then I will come back to the latter.
- 7 Pragmatism is a philosophy of action. The pragmatic maxim asserts that to clarify the meaning of a concept, one has to look for its conceivable practical bearings. In 1903, in his Lowell Lectures, Peirce reformulated the maxim he proposed in "How to make our ideas clear" in order to make it easier to grasp the relation between activity and meaning. He subsequently declared that that "Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood" (CP 5.18).
- 8 However, to claim that action lies at the very core of the pragmatist project is only a half-truth. In his essay entitled "Pragmatism as a philosophy of action," Kilpinen points out that "to see this is not yet [...] to see the essential pragmatist point; in what sense they talk about action. Their usage of the term and the underlying idea differ from what is customary in other philosophical approaches" (163). The point Kilpinen is trying to underline is that "action" has different meanings, according to the different conceptual frameworks in whose terms the notion is defined. So, for instance, analytic philosophers are used to considering actions as external (physical) manifestations of previous internal (mental) resolutions. Their account of action, which Kilpinen calls the "mind-first explanation of action" (164), is clearly dualistic: actions do not contribute to the enhancement and clarification of the meaning of concepts (beliefs, theory or deliberations) because, according to this approach, the latter are fully complete in themselves before being tested in practice. Action is something which is externally added to a ready-made cognitive state: "an intention, plan, or decision first has to be

formed in the acting subject's mind and [...] it then is to be executed in concrete doings" (164-5).

- 9 Pragmatists believe that this depiction of action is radically flawed. They charge the mindfirst explanation of action with relying on the classic mind/body dualism and, consequently, with isolating the subject from the world and making it impossible to understand "the way in which human beings exist in the world" (164). There are two relevant points at stake here, as Kilpinen rightly notes. The first one is that, if Darwinian evolutionism is to be taken seriously – as pragmatism was eager to do – the subject has to be recognized firstly as an organism that strives to cope with his environment. Pragmatists were well aware of the fact that all human knowledge is acquired on the basis of action, without assuming any transcendental warrant for its validity (170). It follows that what a human being is (his concepts, his beliefs, his character) can be determined only through his actions, whose proper aim is to bring about the transformation of the external world into a comfortable dwelling-place. This means that acting within the world turns out to be the very essence of human nature, and it cannot be boiled down to a contingent and somewhat superficial manifestation of something internal, considered as the true reality. The second point that deserves attention is that the mind-first explanation entails an atomistic view of action. According to this perspective, action is always an individual action, upon which the more complicated forms of behaviour are based. Instead, classic pragmatists were deeply interested in general conduct, since "steady behaviour patterns are human action's natural mode of being" (175).
- 10 Accordingly, the main proposal Kilpinen advances in his essay is a consideration of pragmatism as a philosophy of habitual action. Now, especially as far as the English-speaking philosophical world is concerned, Kilpinen states that "the habit-concept is mostly traced to David Hume, who uses it interchangeably with the term 'custom'," so that Hume's account of habit as proceeding from a past repetition "might be called the standard understanding of the habit-term" (171). However, pragmatists do not agree with the Humean conception of habit as a "repetitive, self-propelling behavior"; rather, their aim was to marry "thought and habit [...] together," in order to "[situate] intentionality inside the habitual dimension" (172). Pragmatists "do include reflection into their habit-concept" (172), rejecting the conviction that habit can be boiled down to a mere repetition of the past isolated actions.
- 11 Unfortunately, Kilpinen does not deal extensively with the conceptual strategy pragmatists deploy to attain this goal – that is, the goal of re-defining reflection, rationality and normativity in terms of habitual action. As he admits in the conclusion of his contribution, he aims at providing an overview of pragmatists' new theory of human action, and, insofar as that was his goal, his essay meets it perfectly. Readers who want to delve deeper into the matter are referred to Kilpinen's book *The Enormous Fly Wheel of Society: Pragmatism's Habitual Conception of Action and Social Theory* (2000). However, there is one aspect of his argument that I do not find completely satisfactory. It concerns the relation Kilpinen draws between self-propelling behaviour and rationality. It is not fully clear to me whether Kilpinen is arguing that habit as self-propelling behaviour is specifically different from habit "married with thought." At first glance, it seems evident that classic pragmatists maintained that only deliberately formed and voluntary habits embody rationality. Thus, Kilpinen rightly refers to Peirce's conception of habit as the final logical interpretant of a sign to provide

evidence for his reading. However, even if it holds true for Peirce that the logically meaningful habits are specifically different from mere repetitions of what has been done in the past, it does not follow that Peirce's insight, whose proper field of application was intended to be the nature of logical reasoning, can be so easily extended to all the other pragmatists, who were deeply committed to the social sciences and psychology rather than to logic. Kilpinen quotes a passage from Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*: "The reason why a baby can know little and an experienced adult know much when confronting the same things is not because the latter has a 'mind' which the former has not, but because one has already formed habits which the other has still to acquire" (J. Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 14: 1922. *Human Nature and Conduct*, 128). This quotation can be read in two different ways. It is possible to focus the attention on the notion of an experienced adult, stating that an adult is experienced only when his habits are deliberately formed. This interpretation is plausible and it seems to grasp Dewey's intention. Indeed, the previous quotation goes on to say: "The scientific man and the philosopher like the carpenter, the physician and politician know with their habits not with their 'consciousness'" (*ibid.*). Their habits are reliable because i) they have acquired them through education and ii) they constantly subject them to criticism. However, this conclusion is somewhat counterintuitive: it is apparent that every adult knows much more than a child when confronting the same things, regardless of his being well educated or not. Take, for instance, the common sense concept of a table: is it really plausible to hold that we need conscious reflection to acquire a certain habit of behaving toward tables? Does it make any sense? It is probably much more plausible to assume that, having entertained some relations with tables in previous experiences, we formed habits of behaviour which constitute the meaning we attribute to all the objects encountered in our experience which are table-like. Thus, it seems that, when our most basic habits of behaviour are taken into account, we are compelled to admit that the Humean conception of habit may be enough to explain a large part of our active beingness in the world, provided that we assume that human beings are not mentally collecting passive impressions from the world, but experimenters who actively interact with their environment.

- 12 From Kilpinen's article it is possible to draw the conclusion that pragmatists' practical turn entails a radical re-description of both norms and normativity in terms of habits of behaviour. Višovský deals extensively with this issue in his contribution, "A pragmatist approach to Norms and Normativity." This essay is particularly interesting for two very different reasons. Firstly, it witnesses the difficulties that are met in defining what the pragmatist account of normativity amounts to. These difficulties stem in large part from the fact that pragmatists do not share the same language with other more influential contemporary philosophical traditions. This holds true not only for those concepts through which a theory of action is attained, as Kilpinen pointed out, but also for the concepts which give rise to a sound pragmatist theory of normativity. Višovský enumerates four aspects that provide a good insight into the nature of normativity: "1. Norms are standards (or criteria), 2. norms are prescriptions (including proscriptions), 3. norms involve expectations, 4. norms involve sanction." These are rightly said to be "fully compatible with pragmatism [...] providing the opportunity for their theoretical development within the pragmatist framework" (138). He then advances two distinctions that he judges useful for a right formulation of the issue of normativity. On the one hand, Višovský states that "'normative' has been identified with behavior according to rules; and norms as such have also been

identified with rules. However norms and rules can and should be differentiated." On the other hand, he maintains that "there is a long tradition, which conceptually does not differentiate between norms and values in particular [...]. Norms and values are not identical; these are different phenomena." Now, I think that Višovský takes needless risks in introducing into his analysis of the pragmatist conception of normativity these categories, which do not belong to the pragmatist tradition. For instance, his distinction between normativity and value, which is drawn from Habermas, seems to be somewhat at odds with pragmatist theory. Višovský writes that "[w]hereas i) norms are rather concrete and values are abstract; ii) norms are real and values are ideal; iii) norms are means and values are ends" (139). While the third point is undoubtedly true, and the second is very plausibly true, the first one is inaccurate. Višovský relies deeply on Dewey's analysis of norms and criteria. Now, at least in one sense, Dewey strongly denies that norms are real and values are ideal. Since Dewey is a particularist both in ethics and in epistemology, he holds that the values are real because they are concrete states of the world that the agent strives to attain. And at the same time, he maintains that the norms are ideal in the sense that they are general modes of behaviour. So, it can be argued that the conceptual framework according to which contemporary philosophy deals with normativity does not fit within the categories endorsed by pragmatists. Anyway, the point I want to raise is not that the only admissible approach to pragmatism is the historical one. Rather, I would like to stress the fact that the pragmatist revival announced by the very title of the volume – *Pragmatist Perspectives* – cannot overlook the distance (both theoretical and historical) that separates classical pragmatism from contemporary philosophical approaches.

- 13 The second aspect of Višovský's essay that deserves particular attention consists in its valuable sketch of a viable "pragmatist approach to normativity and norms" (141). Unlike Kilpinen, who is interested in providing a general theory of action, Višovský's main concern is that level of normativity that manifests itself in the complex fields of ethics and politics. The change of focus is relevant because it restricts the discussion to a limited set of specific problems. There is obviously a strong continuity between what can be called a ground level of normativity (corresponding to the acquisition of basic common-sense concepts) and the more refined normative dimension lying at the core of the transactions amongst human beings. However, ethical norms display peculiar properties that arise from the facts of associate life, and cannot be reduced to those simpler forms of interaction holding between man and his environment. Višovský lays stress on the fact that these peculiar properties revolve primarily around the problem of authority and the source of normativity. Discussing John Dewey's conception of conformity, Višovský observes that the mere obedience to authority is not enough to make conformity to social norms ethical, since authority may rely exclusively on violence or on mistaken customary codes of duties. At the same time, this does not amount to proposing a "kind of 'normlessness' or subjectivism" (142). On the contrary, the pragmatic solution to the problem of normativity consists in "the education of a self-independent and creative person" (143), that is, in the formation and enhancement of those habits of valuation that govern a truly reflective and thoughtful morality. But what is the proper structure of a norm? To answer this question, Višovský refers to F. L. Will's essay "Philosophical Governance of Norms." According to Will, norms are active, alive and open to further revisions. Norms are not to be conceived of as fixed schemes that mechanically determine the action or thought to be performed. Norms evolve, undergo alterations, since they "are themselves determined, not only

determining, by the spheres of life they inform" (143). Višovský is undoubtedly right when he states that "[n]orms should not be taken as sacrosanct structures, insusceptible to revision"; rather, "[t]he crucial process is the process of devising (including revising) norms" (143-4). The process of revision of normativity highlights the instrumental nature of the norms and rules embedded in practice. "Norms as criteria of selections are tools and instruments. Norms are just our human tools and instruments for deciding and acting" (145). This instrumental account of normativity has two relevant consequences. Firstly, it entails the rejection of the project of founding normativity on human reason, understood as a separate and a priori faculty. Pragmatism brings all the concepts, norms, and criteria that form the individual's mind down to the earth. As Višovský notices, the source of normativity is "social practice and reason embedded in it, that is, social intelligence" (146). Secondly, the community turns out to be not only the sole and ultimate source of normativity, but also the locus wherein actions guided by norms take place. Referring to Singer's notion of "normative community," Višovský states that "[t]he existence of norms and normative community is the prerequisite of human life as we know it" (144). Through norms, an individual enters into relation with the other persons who belong to the same normative community. In more pragmatist terms, that means that norms provide useful tools to enlarge action. Norms influence action because i) "they enable mutual identification, understanding the responses of others, and social cohesion" (144); ii) they require an active participation of individuals in the process of perpetuation and revision of the normative stance. Finally, since human beings belong to a normative community independently from their will, the mandatory character of normativity is preserved. Thus, the very idea of a normative community entails both the possibility of sanctions of deviant behaviour and the responsibilist assumption according to which the overall quality of a normative community depends on the quality of its members.

- 14 In summary, the pragmatist theory of action and normativity, as it emerges from the contributions written by Kilpinen and Višovský, centres on four theses: i) human beings are agents; ii) pragmatists define action in terms of habit of conduct; iii) a pragmatist theory of action involves a re-description of the concepts of norms and normativity in terms of habitual action; iv) normativity is the consequence and the condition of possibility of associate life. However, the following question remains unanswered: why are human beings to be conceived of primarily as agents? Why do pragmatists hold that the classical interpretation of human beings as knowers is flawed? As Kilpinen notices, the reason "is not immanently epistemological. It rather is ontological" (166). Human beings are agents rather than bare knowers because the world in which they live is not a static world which can be grasped by perception and by reasoning, as classic philosophers believed, but a process-world which becomes meaningful only when agents transform it accordingly to their needs and desires. The second generation pragmatists used the term "nature" to refer to this process of coming to life and the continuous change of things in the world, and they adopted the term "naturalism" to indicate the general philosophical theory according to which there is nothing outside nature – the metaphysical conviction that what is real is what is natural.
- 15 In his essay entitled "Pragmatic Naturalism," Shook deals with the contemporary relevance of a pragmatist approach to naturalism and, at the same time, he provides a convincing reconstruction of the historical debates through which pragmatism forged its conceptual tools. Naturalism is a strong paradigm of inquiry, spanning from

epistemology to ethics and consisting in "the reduction of reality to objects of science and the elimination of anything that resists scientific reduction" (97). At the same time, contemporary philosophers like McDowell, Putnam and Stroud advocate a revised version of the naturalistic program, which is usually called liberal naturalism, whose aim is to recognize the importance of science and, at the same time, to resist the reductionist temptation of denying reality to the common sense concepts. Shook's thesis is that what he calls pragmatic naturalism is closer to the revised form of naturalism than to the stronger naturalistic project. The main feature of pragmatic naturalism is the "combination of empiricism and realism that takes scientific knowledge very seriously" (91). To take scientific knowledge seriously does not mean, however, that science is the ultimate test of validity of every possible concept and belief. Rather, it implies the recognition that science has an effective and specific role in human experience. Shook exposes the pivotal thesis of pragmatic naturalism as follows: "experience has a greater extent than scientific knowledge" (98), so that "[a]ppreciation for the many vital and practical relationships and interpretations among experiences and scientific knowledge inspires the Perspectival Pluralism to postulate one natural world which experience and science both reveal" (106). Perspectival pluralism is one of the six features which, according to Shook, characterized pragmatic naturalism. Besides this, it is an empiricism that is i) critical, insofar as it assumes that even our more sophisticated modes of inference originate in experience (p. 92), and prospective, since it is "focused on the acquisition of new knowledge rather than the systematization of already established knowledge" (95). Moreover, it is an empirical naturalism, which maintains that human experience is not a veil separating the subject from reality, but the path through which the secrets of nature can be revealed. Finally, it is a realism that is both abductive and pragmatic. Shook wants to stress the fact that through abduction, some entities are postulated to explain the pattern of events. The postulated entities are naturally taken as real objects of the world by scientists. However, since some of those entities are unobservable, it seems possible to cast doubt on their reality. Antirealists in the philosophy of science hold that "we should not think that the unobservable entities postulated by highly confirmed hypothesis really do exist" (101). Pragmatic realism is a *via media* between a strong realism towards the existence of objects postulated by sciences and a strong version of instrumentalism. It revolves around the idea that "sufficient experimental success of a model warrants a degree of ontological confidence in the entities described by that model" (104), where an entity is completely defined in terms of the laws that govern its behaviour. In other words, scientific objects are the laws they exhibit.

- 16 Shook's pragmatic naturalism sets both the language and the agenda of a large part of the contemporary pragmatist movement. In the light of it much of the issues dealt with in the volume get their proper meaning and import. So, for instance, Hickman's insistence on technology, that is, the conception that ideas are tools forged in the process of inquiry, explains how human beings can attain a logical point of view, notwithstanding their being parts of nature. The same holds true for the effort made by Bugaeva and Ryder in their "Naturalism and Religion" to understand the practical meaning of religious beliefs. Referring to the naturalistic temptation to deny God's existence, Bugaeva and Ryder state: "[i]t is precisely here that the naturalist has to be careful: the power and the significance of the belief in God is a dimension of the phenomenon that is to be accounted for on natural terms" (238). Since naturalism rules out the hypothesis that God exists outside nature, a pragmatist account of religious

phenomena is compelled to find a plausible way of conveying traditional belief in an omniscient and omnipotent God in a naturalistic fashion.

- 17 These last remarks are particularly interesting, since it is possible to draw from them a general conclusion about what I think is the most relevant feature of most of the contributions collected in this volume. Naturalism was not endorsed by all the classic pragmatists. For instance, Peirce strongly criticized Dewey's project of a naturalistic account of logic, and even James was much less satisfied with a strong naturalistic paradigm than Dewey was. Thus, it seems to me that the present book witnesses that, by assuming naturalism as its proper paradigm of inquiry and trying to develop a socio-naturalistic account of action, the pragmatist debate is progressively shifting from the discussion of themes drawn from Peirce and James to a critical analysis of issues belonging to the second generation pragmatists, such as Dewey, Mead, Tufts, and Santayana. If my interpretation is correct, then the present volume actually keeps its word; it points to some new *Pragmatist Perspectives*, that is, to some new lines of inquiry which might change our inherited image of pragmatism.

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