

Review of *Pragmatism As a Way of Life*. By Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam. Edited by David Macarthur. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 496 pp. \$49.95.

**R**eading *Pragmatism As a Way of Life*—a synoptic collection of essays written by the authors over the past half century—is a fresh, healthy, mind-clearing exercise that every student or scholar of pragmatism should experience, even if he or she disagrees with what the Putnams are saying. Before going into the details of what this reviewer finds correct and incorrect about the arguments in the book, the relevance of the book to scholarship on pragmatism, and the intellectual streams the book follows or does not follow, I want to acknowledge the remarkable style of the Putnams’ philosophical writing. Their book is one of the most clearly reasoned and written books about a philosophical subject that I can recall having read. Among scholars of pragmatism, only Max H. Fisch had this extraordinary ability to the same degree. It is part of the experience of the book, and it must be acknowledged prior to any discussion of its substance.

What is the kernel of the Putnams’ understanding of classical pragmatism? Their particular take on pragmatism grasps its core with a crystalline vision. The pragmatist maxim is not mainly a strict rule of logic, but a more general philosophical understanding of “the interdependence of our conceptual abilities and our practical abilities,” both of which exist in beliefs as complex and multitracked habits of action” (35). Around this maxim, the Putnams envisage a common project that, according to them, and contrary to almost any previous study on “the only original American thought,” encompasses all classical pragmatists.<sup>1</sup> In reference to James, Ruth Anna Putnam writes that according to classical pragmatists, the most important characteristic of human

thought, in both epistemology and morals, is to craft our ideas and values because we need them. “We make moral values because we need moral values, just as we make other things which we need and which unaided nature fails to provide. We make tools, we design and build machines, we cultivate plants and domesticate animals” (73). The crafting of our thoughts and values is a habit of action not so different from humans making their first knives when they needed them. Thinking and doing are really one entity for pragmatists, and Hilary Putnam is right in suspecting that in the critics’ dismissive attitude toward pragmatists, they perhaps overlook something profound and important because of the way in which classic pragmatists described their view. “Given the profound originality of their vision, it is hardly to be wondered if the pragmatists sometimes depicted the relationships between these various abilities as simpler than they actually are” (35). For the time being, it is worth noting that the Putnams have captured the deep anti-intellectualism and even anti-apriorism (49) at the bottom of the classical pragmatists’ common project, which, as Hilary Putnam remarks on, James often called “our” vision that “we” propose (343).

Having clarified the maxim, the Putnams identify the content of this common project as mainly a moral project. Careful understanding is required to appreciate what the authors mean by this characterization. The short version of it appears in the title—*Pragmatism As a Way Of Life*. The moral picture in which they place pragmatism has nothing to do with an exercise in applied ethics or a compartment or shelf in the vast wardrobe of philosophy (331–35). They understand pragmatist morality in the same sense as Pierre Hadot described morality in ancient Hellenist philosophy—morality is a comprehensive attitude toward the universe as expressed in both scientific and humanistic enterprises.<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that pragmatists do not recognize the notorious split between the hard sciences and the humanities. In the same way, the Putnams refuse to recognize the supposed dichotomy between facts and values, both of which they include within their overall understanding of morality.<sup>3</sup> Morality is neither

a set of beliefs nor a set of norms. Instead, morality is a way of life in which we strive for truth while remaining fallibilists, and we consider the method of scientific inquiry as the only one apt to foster human beings' belonging and surviving in an evolving universe in which we need a community to keep developing both socially and individually. The authors' point was:

[R]ather that just as from the perspective of some shared moral values we are able to defend our preference for the scientific over the fundamentalist religious stance, so from within the shared scientific perspective—the willingness to regard what happens as relevant to a reappraisal of values—we can defend our moral choices. (81)

Sometimes the Putnams sound like Giovanni Papini since he identifies pragmatism with the courage of living in order to transform the world. Papini and the Putnams would probably disagree about what this transformation implies, but both emphasize pragmatism's drive toward a different style of life that sometimes remains hidden to classical American pragmatists themselves, possibly because of the strong intellectualist impetus received from Peirce's early work. Peirce himself changed his mind profoundly over the years, but it is true that the first versions of pragmatism were affected by a Kantian-transcendental tendency. The Putnams do not acknowledge this change in Peirce, but, notwithstanding this oversight, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of the Putnams' reading of pragmatism as a unitary and moral project. Scholars will need to address this reading, which is surprisingly closer to interpreters like Colapietro and Margolis than to those such as Hookway and Misak.<sup>4</sup> The Putnams' revival of pragmatism is not intended to put some parts of pragmatism within an analytic contemporary framework; their view is a return to the original project.

In the short space of this review, I will focus on two aspects of the Putnams' work that I consider significantly flawed. The first

one is a residual Kantian legacy that occasionally threatens the project. In order to arrive at the most profound interpretation of the pragmatist maxim, Hilary Putnam conducts an analytic dissection of Peirce's stance because he tends to reduce the maxim to a verification of statements whereas Peirce's original text was talking about ideas and beliefs in a vaguer sense (24). Hilary Putnam's interpretation of Peirce is generally accurate, but the idea is that sometimes Putnam's reading drifts into a Kantian view of the American philosopher. Hilary Putnam quotes Hookway's reading of these rules as a "universal voice" when he speaks about rules of conduct and refers to Kant's Third Critique (222). Hookway ends up by joining Peirce's realism with "a kind of 'presupposition of science' in a Kantian sense" (224), which forgets how much Peirce insisted on how these rules of conduct change over time; he addressed these issues in *What Pragmatism Is and Issues of Pragmatism*.<sup>5</sup> In Peirce, as in James, the historicity of any law, including any logical law, means that synthesis precedes analysis, and that reality is a metaphysical development in which human knowledge is a fallible, limited kind of grasping. There is no transcendental presupposition in classical pragmatism, and it is in this absence that one finds most of its novelty.

Ruth Anna Putnam, even in her wonderful vision of sciences as "continua" (85), still thinks of communication as an addendum of a unique, individualist perspective to other perspectives, where the unique, individualist perspective "has to be tolerant and to seek communication" (85). I think that many pragmatists would have thought the opposite to be true—community is the radical starting point, of which the individual is but a secondary form. Even James's attitude toward the role of single individuals does not escape this vision of a broader all-preceding continuum of experience in which the individual plays a limited role of attention and selection. Paradoxically, Ruth Anna Putnam acknowledges exactly this point in her essay "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist" (360–84).

As David Macarthur notes in his introduction, the Putnams describe the content of the pragmatist way of life as "a third

Enlightenment” (4). I think he is right. Even in their profound grasp of pragmatism, they try to preserve the enlightenment tone that, in one way or another, leads to a residual intellectualism. It is true that sometimes classical pragmatists, themselves, incorporated this residual legacy into their work. However, their profound conception of the continuity of reality and their comparison of human reasoning to artwork, to a crafting of tools, has a very different drive and aim. Pragmatism is a radical alternative to any form of enlightenment and involves a different conception of reason, well beyond the classical conceptions and distinctions that one can find in Descartes and Cartesian philosophers and in Kant’s transcendentalism. When you accept that the pragmatists’ common project was to get rid of those conceptions and distinctions and to paint a completely different picture of reason as an embodied activity,<sup>6</sup> you will find the right place for each of the pieces of the puzzle that, taken individually, carry a great deal of explanatory power in the Putnams’ “reconstruction of philosophy” (331).

The second weakness of the book involves another form of the same residual intellectualism that obscures the radical revolution created by pragmatism. This concern centers on religion. In one of the best passages of the entire book, Ruth Anna Putnam recapitulates James’s view of religious experience (232–47). The reconstruction of James’s work is clear and keen. James, himself, is not a believer in any particular God, and his attitude is not deist or theist. However, in analyzing the psychology of those who believe with an open mind, he accepts that our selves are part of a broader subconscious reality; he does not exclude the possible existence of “the subconscious as the near shore of a sea on whose far shore is God, or the Higher Powers” (245). I consider this to be a splendid, pluralist, fallibilist, consistent acceptance of an important experience in the history humankind, one that—all in all—has brought more good than evil into human history and into many individual lives. Nevertheless, Ruth Anna Putnam concludes: “I find James’s conception of a deity quite appealing and inspiring. But we must recognize that it is just that, a conception” (246). As at many other points in the book (see 74–

75), the Putnams' adherence to an enlightened view of reality and to a closed naturalism seems more rooted in dogma instead of being a real outgrowth of the views of classical pragmatists. Naturalism was certainly part of Dewey's pragmatism but certainly was not part of James's or Peirce's. Naturalism is not a necessary characteristic of the pragmatist movement, whose most admirable feature is its open window on the evolving reality to which we belong. Dewey's struggle with naturalism (314–27) shows that possibly an open attitude that does not preclude anything, not even religion, was closer to the complete revolution of the Cartesian and Kantian project of modernity, which pragmatists initiated without completing.

Despite these important but limited criticisms, the Putnams' wonderful joint effort offers the reader an understanding of the overall common project of classic pragmatists and the depth of the unity between theory and practice. The authors illumine a path for everyone who wants to take pragmatism seriously and put it to work in our contemporary epoch.

Giovanni Maddalena  
University of Molise, Italy  
[maddalena@unimol.it](mailto:maddalena@unimol.it)

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Bernstein, Richard. *The Pragmatic Turn*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
- Brandt, Robert B. *Perspectives on Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Calcaterra, Rosa M. *Interpretare l'esperienza. Scienza, metafisica, etica nella filosofia di Ch. Peirce*. Roma: Editrice IANUA, 1989.
- Calcaterra, Rosa M., Giovanni Maddalena, and Giancarlo Marchetti. *Il pragmatismo. Dalle origini agli sviluppi contemporanei*. Roma: Carocci, 2015.

- Colapietro, Vincent. "Allowing our Practices to Speak for themselves: Wittgenstein, Peirce, and Their Intersecting Lineages." In *New Perspectives on Pragmatism and Analytic Philosophy*. Edited by R.M. Calcaterra. 1–21. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Exercices Spirituels*. Paris: Institut d'Études augustiniennes, 1987.
- Hookway, Christopher. *The Pragmatic Maxim: Essays on Peirce and Pragmatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Maddalena, Giovanni. *The Philosophy of Gesture*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2015.
- Malachowski, Alan, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Margolis, Joseph. *Pragmatism's Advantage. American And European Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Misak, Cheryl. *The American Pragmatists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Peirce, Charles S. *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2., Edited by the Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Different recent accounts that see a profound split among classic pragmatism are to be found in Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 1–13; Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, 1–32; Malachowski, *Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, xiii–xv, 1–45; Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, xiii–xv, 1–45. The idea of the pragmatists' common project is instead at the heart of Calcaterra, Maddalena, and Marchetti, *Il pragmatismo*, 13–18.

<sup>2</sup> Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels*, 25–41.

<sup>3</sup> An important parallel of this view can be found in Calcaterra, *Interpretare l'esperienza*, 133–73.

<sup>4</sup> See Colapietro, "Allowing our Practices to Speak," 1–21; Hookway, *The Pragmatic Maxim*, 182–196; Margolis, *Pragmatism's Advantage*, 1–47; Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, 1–6.

<sup>5</sup> Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 331–59.

<sup>6</sup> See Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, 43–67.