

A NEOPRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION AND SCIENCE

by *J. Wesley Robbins*

Abstract Pragmatists, most notably John Dewey and Richard Rorty, propose overcoming the modern split between science and values with a new image of ourselves as language users. In this new self-understanding, both our scientific and evaluative vocabularies are integral parts of self-reliant human problem solving and coping with the larger natural environment. Our language is not the medium of any higher power from which it derives its legitimacy. On this view, the principal matter at issue between pragmatists and realists so far as interaction between religion and science is concerned is the moral one of human self-reliance.

Keywords: our language; pragmatism; religious humanism; self-reliance.

Pragmatism is one response to what John Dewey called “the deepest problem of modern life,” that of “restoring integration and cooperation between man’s beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct . . .” (Dewey [1929] 1960, 255). This problem is central to discussions in the field of religion and science as indicated, for example, in posing and answering questions about “the place of religion in an age of science.” In what follows, I will: (1) interpret pragmatism as a sort of religious humanism, in which a Darwinian understanding of the difference between humans and other animals plays a crucial role; (2) distinguish this religious humanism from other, more nearly theistic, sorts of religious naturalism; and (3) address the question of interaction, or communication, between religion and science in pragmatic terms. I take what distinguishes

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[*Zygon*, vol. 28, no. 3 (September 1993).]

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humans from other things on earth and in the natural world at large to be the following: the ability to manipulate sentences, the having and ascribing of sentential attitudes. As a good Darwinian, I take this distinguishing factor to be a matter of degree, not the hard and fast difference enshrined in a classical Aristotelian definition that separates its possessors categorically from its nonpossessors.

PRAGMATISM AND RELIGIOUS HUMANISM

"The deepest problem of modern life," simply put, is posed by a clash between our Platonic-Christian religious sensibilities on the one hand and modern mechanistic physics on the other. The former tell us that the ideal values which are authoritative for us are already present in the divine life that animates the world. Our salvation is to be so connected with this antecedent reality that those values are realized in our own lives. The latter tells us that the world in which we live is indifferent to any such ideal values, that they are not to be found in the motions of the heavens or the behavior of atomic particles. In which case, it seems that any commitment we have to ideal values is out of place, of no real significance or legitimacy in this world. This clash is particularly troublesome, of course, given the undeniable predictive and explanatory successes of modern physics.

Dewey's humanistic response to this problem, most notably in *A Common Faith* (Dewey [1934] 1968), was to redefine our traditional religious sensibilities. He allows that authoritative ideal values are not located antecedently in the world as described by modern physics. He refuses the dualistic strategy of relocating them in a distinct spiritual realm, impervious to physical description. It does not follow, however, that human devotion to ideal values is out of place in the natural world, because, Dewey argues, this devotion is not a matter of our connection with existent entities so that their antecedent value may be reproduced in us. Religious faith is, instead, a matter of devotion to our own imaginative projections and to the realization of these ideal ends by our own efforts. Dewey proposes to resolve the clash between religion and science by transferring a function, that of formulating and realizing ideal values (traditionally assigned to an extrahuman entity such as the supernatural God or the natural world itself), to the operations of human intelligence in causal interaction with the larger natural environment. In the process, he advocates that we learn to rely on our own abilities for salvation rather than expecting that this will come to us via our connection with extrahuman higher powers.

This is the upshot of Dewey's distinction between religious faith as a practical-moral devotion to imaginatively produced ideal ends and religion as a set of beliefs about "unseen higher powers" in which such ideals exist antecedently. It is the import of his redefinition of God as the "active relation between ideal and actual" and his location of the ideal in our imaginative projections from natural enjoyments as diverse as those of food and drink, shelter, friendship, adventure, and play (Dewey [1934] 1968, 51).

Richard Rorty is a latter-day Deweyan religious humanist. What Rorty calls "final vocabularies" articulate Dewey's practical devotion to ideal ends. These final vocabularies are "the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest doubts and our highest hopes" (Rorty 1989, 73). An ironist, in Rorty's terms, is someone who has continuing doubts about his or her own final vocabulary, yet "insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (Rorty 1989, 73). Such people, Rorty says, tend to see the choice between final vocabularies as a matter of "playing the new off against the old" (Rorty 1989, 73) rather than of discovering anything about their adequacy to prior entities. Rorty's ironist, simply put, is a person who takes to heart Dewey's distinction between the religious as devotion to imaginatively projected ideal values and a religion as beliefs about "unseen higher powers" in which such ideals are antecedently realized.

At the conclusion of his essay "Contemporary Philosophy of Mind," Rorty conjoins two propositions. The first denies that our ability to use language, including its changeability, needs explaining in terms of conformity to a prior source. This is the Deweyan point that the legitimacy of our thinking is not a function of its adequacy to antecedent entities in which ideal values are already stored. The second proposition affirms that "we need nothing more than confidence in our own poetic power" (Rorty 1982, 346). This is Rorty's version of Dewey's exhortation that we learn to rely on our own abilities for salvation. Rorty's description of what we have to rely on as "poetic power" calls attention to the transformative effect that idiosyncratic usages of language can bring into our lives. This reemphasizes the Deweyan point that human intelligence itself is a transitory thing that is formed and reformed in interactions with the larger environment in which it is located, not something that unfolds in a direction already determined by a prior form.

Deweyan religious humanism, particularly its just-mentioned understanding of language use as a changeable entity whose stability

is a function of causal interactions between human organisms and the larger natural environment, owes an obvious debt to Darwin. Dewey stated two themes in his essay "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" (Dewey [1909] 1989) that are absolutely crucial to his version of pragmatism. There Dewey says, first, that Darwin set the precedent for an anti-essentialist understanding of human intelligence, one in which the classical notion of "a fixed form and final cause" (Dewey [1909] 1989, 129) plays no role. Second, he notes the liberating effect of this new self-image. Darwin, says Dewey, "emanipated, once for all, genetic and experimental ideas as an organon of asking questions and looking for explanations" (Dewey [1909] 1989, 130).

If, as Dewey suggests, there is no fixed form at work in the formation and reformation of our use of language over time, then its legitimacy is not a function of any such antecedent structure that it has to realize. Philosophy's classical injunction to self-knowledge has to be redefined. There is no prior structure for it to recollect and articulate. As Dewey puts it, "the new logic outlaws, flanks, dismisses—what you will—one type of problems and substitutes for it another type. Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them" (Dewey [1909] 1989, 132). The legitimacy of human language use devolves to the ideal values that we formulate in it and to how well these (our) purposes are served by it.

This view of human language use as a contingent, transitory thing without "fixed form and final cause" has its roots in William James's account of mental categories in the last chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*. There James asks à la Darwin why categories like those of space, time, number, substance, and causality might not be, in the human mind, "pure idiosyncracies, spontaneous variations, fitted by good luck (those of them which have survived) to take cognizance of objects (that is, to steer us in our active dealings with them), without being in any intelligible sense immediate derivatives from them?" (James [1890] 1983, 1228).

Dewey expands on this in his Darwin essay. The human mind, he argues, has no fixed agenda vis-à-vis the rest of the world. It has, for example, no permanent set of questions that it is destined to pose and try to answer. Intellectual progress is not a function of such a structure or of its philosophical articulation. Instead, says Dewey, progress "usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume. . . . We do not solve them; we get over them. Old questions are solved by

disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place" (Dewey [1909] 1989, 134). The pragmatist redefinition of human thinking is a case in point of this sort of piecemeal change.

Rorty carries on this Darwinian motif in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. There he proposes that we think of what he calls "our language," that is to say, Western artistic, political, scientific, and religious practices, as being, like Darwin's species, "something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies" (Rorty 1989, 16). Let the world be as lifeless and mechanical as any physicist wants to make it out to be. It makes no difference, because "genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces" (Rorty 1989, 17). Linguistic usages that are out of the ordinary, like Saint Paul's use of the term *agape*, or Sir Isaac Newton's of *gravity*, or Albert Einstein's of *space* and *time*, or Dewey's of *God*, says Rorty in a remark reminiscent of James, were

for all we know, or should care . . . the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. . . . [or] of some odd episodes in infancy. . . . It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. (Rorty 1989, 17)

Rorty's continuing invocation of Donald Davidson's work should be understood in this connection. Davidson's account of language paints exactly the picture of human language users as self-reliant (so far as the significance and the legitimacy of words are concerned) that Rorty, the religious humanist, wants. Davidson's, says Rorty, is the first systematic treatment of language which breaks completely with the notion of language as something that can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self. For Davidson breaks with the notion that language is a medium—a medium either of representation or of expression. (Rorty 1989, 10)

In Davidson's view, there are plenty of other entities in the world to which human manipulations of sentences stand in causal connection. There are none to which our sentences stand in a relationship that gives them meaning or makes them true. Meaning and truth are both intralinguistic, functions of connections between the sentences that we use rather than of their connection to anything else in the world. The causal connection that language has to the rest of the world is useless as a measure against which to criticize and evaluate our usages. Questions of legitimacy are intralinguistic. They are, as Dewey said, matters of the ideal values that we formulate in language and of how well our linguistic practices serve these, our, purposes.

Deweyan religious humanism has no stake in the natural world's being one way or another, for example, organicist and

indeterministic rather than mechanical and deterministic. Our language includes both scientific vocabularies that are deterministic in character and ones that are indeterministic. There is no need to rank these in terms of their closeness to how the natural world would have itself described. For if, as religious humanists assume, the natural world is indifferent to human concerns, then *a fortiori* it is indifferent to our descriptions of it, be they in organicist and indeterministic or mechanical and deterministic terms. The respective significance and legitimacy of these vocabularies in any case is a function of their usefulness to us, not of their adequacy to the world itself.

Pragmatism thus encourages what both James and Dewey described as a change in "the seat of intellectual authority," a change from our language as being the faithful medium of the antecedent nature of things to its serving our purposes. But, and this is the crucial point, this shift in authority to ourselves is understood in a novel way. The legitimacy of our language is not a function of its adequacy to any completed formal structure or intrinsic nature, whether that is located in the outside world or inside us.

With this account of our language in hand, pragmatists can say that its artistic, moral, and religious strands are no more out of place in the world described by modern physics than the scientific strand. None of these stands to anything else in the world as a more or less adequate medium. The physical sciences are but one among several places in our cultural practices where devotion to imaginatively generated ideal values comes into play. They are one of several instances of Dewey's "active relation between ideal and actual." As such, the legitimacy of our scientific vocabularies is, like that of any other strand in our language, a function of their connection with more and different language, not of their connection to extralinguistic entities.

People who happen to hit on the internal structure of the atom, for example, are no more firmly in touch with reality than people who dream great dreams of social justice or people who come up with new forms of art. What matters in any of these instances is, to paraphrase James, how those vocabularies steer us in our active dealings with the world. We are self-reliant human beings in any event, not the mouthpiece for higher powers, whether talking about the motions of the atoms in the void or about the artistic merits of French Impressionism.

RELIGIOUS HUMANISM AND OTHER FORMS OF
RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Religious naturalists, as I use the term, think it necessary for the sake of our traditional religious sensibilities to correct the impression, gained from modern physics, that the natural world is indifferent to the values that humans care about. They purport to identify an extralinguistic entity in relationship to which our language (and our final vocabularies in particular) gains universal significance and legitimacy rather than being an isolated island in the natural world. Religious naturalists attribute the apparent indifference of the natural world to the character of its description in modern physics rather than to the nature of the world itself. They invoke a more adequate description according to which ideal values are antecedently located in the natural world after all. There are at least two different ways to do this.

The first attributes the impression of indifference to the abstract mathematical character of the vocabulary of modern physics and the premium that it places on predictability. This is corrected by a concrete metaphysical vocabulary, one that is more adequate to the intrinsic nature of the physical world itself. This is the strategy of all versions of process philosophy that invoke the fallacy of misplaced concreteness in order to counter reductive materialism. Process philosophers can then claim that the natural world, when described metaphysically, is not really indifferent, but vibrant, alive, growing, and laden with value. There are moral lessons to be learned, and spiritual comforts to be had, from it after all.

For example, William Dean in his book *American Religious Empiricism* postulated a “trophism” toward complexity that runs throughout the entire natural world (Dean 1986, 58–62). The physical sciences attest to this cosmic tendency in various ways. But, it is better felt aesthetically, and expressed in the thick terminologies of the arts, than told in the thin abstractions of physics. Our salvation remains, as it was before, a matter of being so connected with a higher power (the cosmic trophism toward complexity in this case) that its antecedent value is realized in our own lives.

The second approach attributes the impression of indifference to the relatively crude character of early modern physics, a flaw corrected in its more recent successors. While earlier versions were mechanistic, the vocabulary of contemporary physics is holistic, or

organicist, or whatever. Consequently, we do not require a vocabulary other than that of physics to tell us that the world in which we live is alive and fraught with value. The modern problem does not require meta-physics for its resolution. It just requires “beta”-physics.

For example, advocates of what Willem Drees calls the “Participatory Anthropic Principle” take the indeterminateness of the basic entities of quantum theory to establish that the physical world, if it is subject to quantum mechanical description, must be a self-interpreting, self-conscious entity (Drees 1990, 85). Human consciousness, accordingly, is not a cosmic accident of some sort that is alien to matter. It is a constituting power that is an absolute necessity if the physical world is to be a determinate entity at all. In which case, the best physics that we have describes a world in which consciousness—most notably ours—is of the essence, of universal significance after all. To quote Drees, who in turn quotes Sir John Eccles, “We are not mere creatures, but ‘central participators in the great cosmic drama’” (1990, 85). Hegel, it turns out, spoke better than he knew!

There are at least two problems with both of these approaches. The first is simply a matter of the plausibility of the vocabularies that describe these universally significant entities. We are asked to believe that the legitimacy of what we say and do about dogs and cats, flowers, social justice, electrons, people, the national debt somehow hangs on vocabularies whose legitimacy is, if anything, less obvious than that of any of the aforementioned. That is why Dewey advised that we disconnect religious faith “once for all from matters that are continually becoming more dubious” (Dewey [1934] 1968, 44).

The second problem is a matter of the need for such corrections to vocabularies that portray the natural world as indifferent to human concerns in the first place. It is one thing to allow that an extant vocabulary in physics stands to be replaced by something better down the line. It is something else again to suggest that, apart from some such replacement, what we say and do now in its entirety has no real significance or legitimacy in the world. Pragmatists insist on the former. We write off the latter to nostalgia for our Platonic-Christian religious sensibilities. Religious humanists take modern physics at face value on this point. The indifference of the natural world to our descriptions of it is not something to be defied in futile acts of self-assertion. Nor is it something to be denied by wishful thinking. It is, instead, an opportune environment in which to pursue the heretofore merely tantalizing prospect of genuine self-reliance on the part of human beings.

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN
PRAGMATIC TERMS

Given this sort of religious humanism, what primary, or basic, concepts enable interactions between religion and science? On one interpretation of it, this question presupposes exactly the essentialist view of language that pragmatists reject. Primary concepts are the natural starting points apart from which our language cannot realize the form of language and thus accomplish its appointed task. Secondary concepts are those that are merely coincidental, of no great moment one way or another, to that realization. Understood in this way, pragmatists have a short answer to this question. There are no primary concepts underlying interactions between religion and science. There are only more or less expedient ones.

Unfortunately, the essentialist version of this question has set the terms for much of the debate about rival solutions to the modern problem. It guarantees full employment for the "methodologist." Methodologists are supposed experts on the subject of the essence of language and the procedures that lead to its realization. They provide three pieces of information in answer to the question about primary concepts: (1) a description of the essence of language in terms of, for example, correspondence to reality, or self-expression, or the constituting of experience; (2) identification of a particular vocabulary that comes closest to articulating this essence—for example, that of physics, or Christian theology, or the fine arts, or transcendental philosophy; (3) proposal of this vocabulary as the *lingua franca* for our language. Fluency in the various strands of our language is supposed to require at least an implicit grasp of this particular vocabulary, since it is the one that articulates the form of language.

The resulting modern methodological debate oscillates between reductive physicalism on the one hand and religionism on the other. According to the former, language is nothing but the medium in which the atoms in the void manage to represent themselves accurately. Its candidate for the *lingua franca* is the vocabulary of microphysics. According to the latter, language is the medium of deity appointed to represent God's intentions accurately or, alternatively, to express the theological dimension of the natural world adequately. Its candidate for the *lingua franca* is some religious vocabulary, perhaps that of Christianity.

The religionist side of this dispute is by no means limited to the lunatic fringe of scientific creationists represented by Henry Morris or to the Alvin Plantinga school of Christian philosophy. Hermeneutical theologians of a liberal religious persuasion have made a

career out of arguing that it is the task of propositional language to express prepositional entities that are inherently theological (the meaning of Being, for example) and that the vocabulary of Christian theism comes closest to accomplishing this task. On this view, fluency in the various strands of our language requires at least an implicit grasp of this Christian vocabulary since it articulates the source from which they all, including the scientific, get their meaning in the first place.

Pragmatists want to short-circuit this modern methodological debate (and its oscillation between rival candidates for the position of primary concepts) by doing away with the distinction between primary and secondary concepts. We want to redefine debate about the modern problem in order to get past disputes about the essence of language that are endless, divisive, and demoralizing. When language is understood as having no "fixed formal and final cause," none of the various strands in our language has pride of place because it is the realization of that structure. By the same token, none articulates the formal structure that makes communication between different vocabularies in our language possible.

Being fluent in the various vocabularies we employ involves what Donald Davidson (in an essay entitled, aptly enough, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs") calls "passing theories" (Davidson 1986, 442). A passing theory about the sounds and marks that someone makes is part of a larger theory about that person's overall behavior. It is a set of educated guesses, constructed and reconstructed over time, about what that individual is likely to do in various circumstances. These are passing theories because they have to be revised constantly in order to accommodate idiosyncratic as well as run-of-the-mill behavior, linguistic and otherwise: everything from tired clichés and old jokes to malapropisms, striking metaphors, and inspired puns.

Communication between different vocabularies in our language, on the part of the people who employ them, occurs when their educated guesses about each other's behavior (and their expectations about their own behavior) overlap. They speak the same language, says Davidson, when they "tend to converge on passing theories" (Davidson 1986, 445), to the point that they are able, to paraphrase Quine, to bicker with one another like siblings. When we think about language in this way, Davidson says,

We should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally. For there are no rules for arriving at passing theories that work. . . . There is no more chance of regularizing, or

teaching, this process than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories that cope with new data—for that is what this process involves. . . . There is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what philosophers, at least, have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned or mastered. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language users master and then apply to cases. (Davidson 1986, 446)

Davidson's point, *apropos* interaction between religion and science, is that just as there is no logic of discovery when it comes to constructing theories about the physical world, by the same token there is no logic of discovery when it comes to fluency in, and communication between, the religious and scientific strands of our language. The skill is the same in both instances: the ability to formulate theories in order to anticipate physical events and processes and to reformulate our theories to accommodate new, unexpected data that are encountered over time. There is no more reason to expect guidance for this process in the case of language, in the form of articulation of its antecedent formal structure, than there is to expect a logic of discovery to guide theory construction about things other than language. The methodologist is out of a job in both instances.

The same thing that enables people to communicate in any case enables communication between the vocabularies of religion and science. As Davidson puts it, all "two people need, if they are to understand each other through speech, is the ability to converge on passing theories from utterance to utterance" (Davidson 1986, 445). There is no prior structure, no primary concepts, that both vocabularies have to share because it is the form of language. Interactions between the religious and scientific vocabularies in our language are part of the trial and error process by which human language use changes over time and new vocabularies are created out of old. There are histories of such processes. There is no philosophy of them.

Some might conclude from this that pragmatism is an antitraditionalist approach to the question of interactions between religion and science. That all depends. Pragmatism certainly is not a version of know-nothing-ism, purporting to come up with better candidates for primary concepts precisely because of ignorance of the candidates that have been proposed in the past. We are well aware of the history of philosophical theories that purport to put religion and science in their respective proper places in our culture by identifying primary concepts. The resolve to adopt an antiessentialist account of language is, in effect, a judgment about the usefulness of that history. The

judgment is that the modern methodological debate about the essence of language has turned out to be more trouble than it is worth. Pragmatists propose to end this debate, and thus the dispute between reductive physicalism and religionism, by dropping the subject of primary concepts entirely.

CONCLUSION

The pragmatist solution to “the deepest problem of modern life,” put in Dewey’s words, is that “scientific judgments are to be assimilated to moral [ones]” (Dewey [1908] 1982, 279). Rorty describes the holistic culture that pragmatists imaginatively project as one that runs

from physics to poetry, as a single, continuous, seamless activity in which the divisions are merely institutional and pedagogical. This would prevent us from making a moral issue of where to draw the line between “truth” and “comfort.” We would thus fulfill the mission of the syncretic and holistic side of pragmatism—the side that tries to see human beings doing much the same sort of problem-solving across the whole spectrum of their activities (*already* doing it and so not needing to be urged to start doing it). (Rorty 1991, 76)

The modern problem, on the pragmatist interpretation of it, is not a theoretical matter to be resolved by discovering the description that is adequate to the connection between human language use and the rest of the world. The question for pragmatists is, What self-image are we better off having: thinking of ourselves and our language as the medium of a higher message? Or, thinking of ourselves as making messages up as we go along, which we hope will enable us to live better in the world and with one another than we have in the past? Pragmatists do not attack the notion of language as medium, and realism as an option in the field of religion and science, because we believe that they describe inadequately something for which we have an adequate description of our own. We believe, instead, that realism is a reactionary impediment to human self-reliance and that the pragmatist account of the human ability to use language can make our life in the world better than before.

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