THE LIMITS OF PRAGMATISM AND THE LIMITS OF REALISM

by Nancey Murphy

Abstract.   I argue here for a limited version of pragmatism—called conceptual pragmatism—that recognizes that conceptual systems are to be evaluated according to their usefulness for helping us get around in the world. Once a conceptual system is in place, however, the truth of sentences is a matter of both empirical fit and coherence with the rest of our knowledge. The error of critical realists is to fail to take into account the limited conceptual relativity that is to be expected on the basis of conceptual pragmatism. The conceptual realist thesis applies equally in science and theology.

Keywords: critical realism; pragmatism; science and theology.

J. Wesley Robbins's article, entitled "A Neo-Pragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science" (1993), has stimulated me to attempt to develop an account of language, truth, and "reality" that gives due regard to the role of pragmatism in science and theology, but grants it a more limited role than does Robbins. I would suggest that assent to theoretical sentences is always governed by the way the world is, by the requirement of consistency with other relevant sentences, *and* by human interests (see also my 1989a). These factors cannot easily be teased apart, although in some cases one predominates over the others. So Robbins is correct to illuminate the role of the pragmatic in science and religion, but he overstates his case by ignoring or denying the other two factors. In what follows, I shall provide a more limited (and, I hope, more nuanced) account of the role of pragmatism in knowledge by sketching out a thesis which I shall call "conceptual pragmatism."

In addition, I claim that Robbins's account of science and religion fails to treat science and theology equally. To put the point in the language of a popular debate, Robbins is "antirealist" with regard

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to religion, but "realist" with regard to science. I believe that my more nuanced form of "conceptual pragmatism" will make it possible to see what is right about current realist theses, but also to see their limitations. In any event, science and theology can and ought to be treated equally with regard to their realist claims.

Finally, I shall turn to the realist debate itself to see what light might be shed on it by my conceptual pragmatist thesis. Along the way, I shall make a few brief remarks about a recent review of my book *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (1990a) by Wentzel van Huyssteen (1992).

CONCEPTUAL PRAGMATISM

Earlier in this century, Rudolf Carnap (1950) distinguished between what he called "internal questions" and "external questions." Internal questions regard the existence of entities, *given* the concepts we use to describe them. "Do unicorns exist?" is an internal question. "Do material objects exist?" looks like the same kind of question because it has the same form. But Carnap's point was that this is a very different sort of question. It is a question about whether or not to talk in terms of material objects. Answers to internal questions are to be settled by empirical observation. Answers to external questions, however, are settled on pragmatic grounds: Do we get along better describing experience in material-object language or, say, in phenomenalist language? Only rare and endangered species of philosophers opt for the latter.

Carnap was thinking mainly of our basic philosophical vocabulary as being governed pragmatically. What if we extend this view to all of our concepts? This is apparently what Robbins (following Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, et al.) has in mind when he speaks, for instance, of the significance and legitimacy of vocabularies being "a function of their usefulness to us . . ." (1993, 342).

So the difference between my account and Robbins's cannot be in the positive thesis that conceptual (linguistic) resources are governed by their utility. However, conceptual pragmatism can and should be distinguished from what I shall call sentential pragmatism. By this I mean to refer to pragmatist accounts of the *truth* of sentences (statements, propositions). That is, once a descriptive vocabulary is in place, we can create meaningful sentences using those terms, and then enquire about their truth. The classical American pragmatists, William James and C. S. Peirce, argued that pragmatism applied to the truth of sentences. For James, to claim that a statement is true *means* that it is useful: He held a pragmatic theory of the *meaning* of

the word *true*. Peirce called his position pragmaticism to distinguish it from James's. Peirce took utility for predicting future experiences as a *criterion* for truth, and his views are really more empiricist than pramatist.

The position that I advocate here rejects pragmatic theories of the meaning of truth; when we say that a sentence is true, we do not mean (merely) that it is useful. Peirce's pragmaticism is not wrong-headed, but it would be less confusing simply to call it empiricism—and then it would need to be corrected and amplified in light of the developments in philosophy of science since his day.

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

The odd thing about Robbins's treatment of religion and science is that he obviously assumes the existence of the natural world; he also claims that religions and scientific language have the same status—as acceptable on the basis of their usefulness to us—and yet he also assumes the nonexistence of God. This set of positions is inconsistent.

Robbins claims that matters of truth and reality are intralinguistic, so let us make the point against him using his own presuppositions. We have two vocabularies: the vocabulary of science, and a religious vocabulary, such as the language of Christianity. Robbins argues that when we say that something is *real*, we are saying that the term (concept) which it instantiates is part of a system of concepts that fulfills human values. But now Robbins has a choice: Is there a world in which these human values are pursued, or not? This is an older "realist" issue: the question of realism versus idealism. In talking about human life in general, Robbins obviously takes the realist option. But if Christian vocabulary is equally as valuable for pursuing human ends as the vocabulary of physics, then, by parity of reasoning, should he not be committed to the existence of a "spiritual reality" as well? There is no justification for arguing, as does Dewey, that religious faith is "[merely] a matter of devotion to our own imaginative projections" (Robbins 1993, 336).

So what should it mean to say that science and theology equally provide languages that further human ends? On my account, this is to say that the nature of reality is such that we need both theological and scientific concepts to make our way about in it effectively.

PRAGMATISM AND REALISM

If concepts (however they are first introduced) endure because of their utility, then we should expect a *limited* conceptual relativism. That is, we can imagine having developed one or more different sets

of concepts that work equally as well as the ones we have. In fact, history shows this to be a plausible view. For example, there may have been a time (or perhaps two different times) when atomist and hylomorphic conceptions of matter were equally useful. The Hopi concepts that translate roughly as *manifest* and *not-manifest* might have done equally well under some circumstances as our collection of concepts: *past, present, future; here,* and *there* (and might turn out to be surprisingly useful in a relativistic conception of space-time).

However, it is extremely important to stress that this is a *limited* relativism. It is not the case that all conceptual systems exhibit comparable "adequacy to the world itself" (pace Robbins [1993, 342]). Because there is an "objective," "real" world, some concepts and systems of concepts are extremely useful and others are not. For example, *green* is very useful; Nelson Goodman's *grue* is not.[1] The concept of *natural motion* turns out to be a much less useful concept than *inertial motion.*

So while concepts are human contrivances and not pictures or representations of reality, they are shaped by a real world. And *given* a stable set of concepts, we can go on to formulate sentences, most of whose criteria for acceptance (or acceptance as true) can best be described as a combination of coherence and empirical adequacy. Thus, I disagree with Robbins when he says that truth is *purely* intra-linguistic (1993, 341); *given* a stable conceptual system, truth is in part a function of the way the world is.

To sum up, the extent of the realist claim that I would make is that while concepts are human creations, adopted because of their utility, utility itself is conditioned both by human goals and purposes and by the way the world "really" is.

THE LIMITS OF REALISM

Now, for the problems with most versions of scientific or critical realism. Several years ago, James McClendon and I became intrigued by the claims of the "Yale School" to be doing "post-liberal" or "postmodern" theology (particularly George Lindbeck [1984] and Ronald Thiemann [1985]). To evaluate that claim, we took note of the philosophical ideas they employed in their writings and compared them to central modern philosophical assumptions. We agreed that the philosophy they used did in fact represent such a radical shift that it deserved to be called postmodern. In our paper, "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies" (1989b), we argued that genuinely postmodern philosophy involved an

epistemological shift from foundationalism to *holism,* a shift in philosophy of language from a referential or representative account of meaning to one based on *use,* and in metaphysics from atomism and reductionism to a nonreductive view of the relations of parts to wholes. A theology that operated with these new philosophical assumptions deserved to be called postmodern.

Subsequently, I used the modern-postmodern distinction, as McClendon and I had defined it, to analyze the realist-antirealist debate in philosophy of science (1990b). To a greater extent than is often the case, the debate seemed to be plagued by a failure of all parties involved to understand one another. The reason, I suggested, was that critical realists and some antirealists were still thinking in modern philosophical categories, while some nonrealists were postmodern in the way defined above. Just as in the case of a paradigm shift in science—where those who have not yet made the shift to the new paradigm are unable fully to understand the views of those who have—so here, modern thinkers consistently fail to understand those who are postmodern.

Wentzel van Huyssteen claims to hold a postmodern critical realism. However, his view is a "mongrel" position: While he claims to be anti- or postfoundationalist (which is one of the criteria for postmodern thought as defined above), he still holds to a representative-referential theory of language (which is thoroughly modern). If I am correct in my explanation of the failures to communicate across the modern-postmodern divide, and if van Huyssteen has not in fact completed the transition from modern to postmodern thought, we should expect to find instances of misunderstanding in his interpretations of postmodern thinkers.

In fact, this is what we find in his review of my book. Having begun with an excellent summary of the main content of the book, van Huyssteen turns to criticism, where he describes the process of communal discernment (which I have presented as a possible source of experiential data for a scientific theology) as "the thoroughly postmodern idea of communal discernment" (1992, 232). I take it that his reason for calling discernment (a practice found *throughout* the history of Christianity) "postmodern" is that the results are not the sort of fact that modern philosophers hoped would serve as an "objective" foundation for knowledge.

Van Huyssteen goes on to claim that my advocacy of the practice of discernment as a source of data for theology results in my being unable to give an account of theological explanations that are "transcommunal" (a term from Philip Clayton's recent book [1989]). However, this criticism shows that van Huyssteen has

missed the main point of the book. The problem Thomas Kuhn raised for philosophy of science was how to give a rational account of theory choice (or of how explanations in science can be justified transcommunally) if the data upon which the various explanations are based are theory-laden. The value of Imre Lakatos's methodology (which I proposed as a model for theological reasoning) is to show that *even if* we grant the "non-transcommunal" status of the data, we can still make transcommunal judgments about the relative epistemic worth of competing explanations. We do this, says Lakatos, on the basis of the relative progressiveness of the competing research programs—that is, on how well each program does at explaining anomalies, its own theory-laden anomalies, in a manner that is not ad hoc ([1970] 1978). This is not a universal criterion of rationality, but it is one that all scientists, regardless of their particular theoretical loyalties, can agree upon, and it is one that I propose for theologians as well. So judgments made in its light would indeed be transcommunal.

My suspicion is that van Huyssteen, failing to understand postmodern thought from the inside, has simply equated it with relativism. This has led me to an important recognition. When Lindbeck, and then McClendon and I, began writing about "postmodern" theology, there was no universally recognized use for the term. Since then, however, the deconstructionists seem to have captured the label for their own work. Consequently, if I had it to do over again, I would never have described the no-longer-modern philosophical theses with which I work as "postmodern." It has proven to be impossible to avoid having my views confused with the relativist views of the deconstructionists.

I want, now, to try to make the point against critical realist accounts of knowledge by using the conceptual pragmatist thesis I have outlined above. Critical realists want to go directly from claims about our having good evidence for the truth of sentences containing theoretical terms (either theological or scientific) to claims about the existence of objects to which those terms refer. What they leave out of account is the question of whether or not the concepts used in those systems are the best or final set (if it even makes sense to ask this).

Kuhn did more than anyone to raise this second and most interesting question. Rather than viewing the history of science as progress toward the day (always our own day) when true sentences about the world have been devised and confirmed, he alerted us to the fact that the history of science is a history in which conceptual systems are rejected and replaced. Within a given conceptual scheme, scientists deal with the question of confirmation (truth) of

sentences, and can answer existence questions with a simple yes or no. But now we have to ask, in addition, what the criteria for acceptance or rejection of conceptual systems are. Here the question of truth or falsity does not apply. In fact, no characterization that only admits of a yes or no answer will be suitable: We have to order conceptual schemes as more or less adequate. But more or less adequate for what? The answer is: for *our* getting around in, making sense of, the *real* world. Human needs (such as the need for a theoretical account simple enough to process mentally) and the constraints imposed by the world itself are inseparable.

To sum up, the high level of confirmation of current scientific theories gives us warrant for saying they are "true" accounts of reality. But the theory being true is the product of two factors: the way the world is and the acceptance, at least for the time being, of the conceptual scheme from which it draws its terms. Because of the necessity of taking account of conceptual relativity, we can ask in addition about the adequacy of the conceptual system itself, but we will have no grounds for saying that one set *pictures* reality and no others do. In fact, such a claim makes little sense. The widely accepted thesis that theological and scientific terms are metaphorical should have been a tip-off to the critical realists that a representative theory of language is inadequate. "Juliet is the sun"—how does that represent reality? A postmodern nonrealist is not denying that Juliet exists. But in what sense is she "like the sun"? Is "like the sun" the one and only correct description of her?

A PRAGMATIST VIEW OF THE REALISM DEBATE

I mentioned above that a peculiar fact about the debate between realists and antirealists is that opponents often fail to understand one another's positions. This is despite the fact that, when pressed, most parties seem to agree on the salient facts about knowledge: It is a human creation; it is fallible and imperfect; and yet there is something that it is *about*—that is, most antirealists are not idealists or solipsists or phenomenalists. Why, then, the heated exchanges? I suggested above that the problem is one of moderns failing to understand the views of postmoderns. And there is also the problem, mentioned above, that anyone who claims now to represent a postmodern position is likely to have deconstructionist views attributed to her. But there is another issue as well. From a postmodern perspective, modern critical realists and modern antirealists can be said to misconstrue the *nature* of the debate: They believe that there is some "fact of the matter" at stake, but there is not. The debate

is better construed as a disagreement about the use of language.

Prior to Kuhn in science, and prior to historical consciousness in general, our regular uses of the words *true* and *real* were such that we were entitled to apply *true* to our best-confirmed theories, and to call the entities they postulated *real*. That is, in Stephan Körner's terms, sentences such as "A high degree of confirmation warrants truth claims" and "True sentences describe real entities" were internally incorrigible in our categorial framework (1970, 14).

However, both realists and antirealists have now recognized that there are problems here: When we reject the phlogiston theory, do we now say that it "used to be true" and that "phlogiston used to be real"? No. Looking back, we revise our claims and say "we used to think the phlogiston theory was true," and "we used to think phlogiston was real." But what are we to say about our current theories and postulated ontologies if we are convinced that current scientific texts and current theological texts, too, are destined to go the way of all things? The two vociferous proposals are either: (1) continue to speak of truth and reality, but do so more guardedly, more cautiously—thus we get a critical realism that differentiates itself from the earlier way of talking about truth and reality by designating the latter as "naive" realism; or, (2) scrap the language of truth and reality altogether—thus we get antirealism.

My own proposal has been that the debate itself be scrapped, since it is riddled with confusion, and because merely asserting realist or antirealist theses does nothing to further our understanding of knowledge. Yet, here I go, entering into the debate once again.

I said at the outset that all judgments of truth involve concerns about the way the world is, about coherence with the rest of our knowledge, and human interests, and that in general no single factor can be elevated above the others. Yet in some particular instances, one of the three factors may be the predominant one. I have claimed that when it comes down to specifics, realists and antirealists tend to show a surprising amount of agreement on the facts of the matter with regard to human knowledge—on the way the epistemic world is. I have also said in so many words that the problem both sides are trying to resolve is a matter of linguistic *consistency*—how to find a new usage of *true* and *real* that is consistent with all that we know about knowledge.

This leaves the pragmatic factor. With so much agreement regarding the representative and coherence dimensions, I am led by process of elimination to suspect that pragmatic concerns must be the predominant factor giving shape to the two positions. Is it possible that realists are motivated by their traditionalist or conservative

leanings, and antirealists by their iconoclastic bent? Test this thesis on scholars you know: Are the realists always more conservative than their antirealist counterparts? If so, my diagnosis of the debate succeeds on the *representative* dimension. It is also *consistent* with the analysis presented in this paper. And it might also prove itself to be *useful* in persuading scholars in science and theology to spend their time on more profitable issues than this one.

NOTES

1. The predicate *grue* applies to all things examined before time *t* just in case they are green, but to all other things just in case they are blue ([1955] 1973, 74).

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