

# PRAGMATIST CONCEPTIONS OF NATURALISM

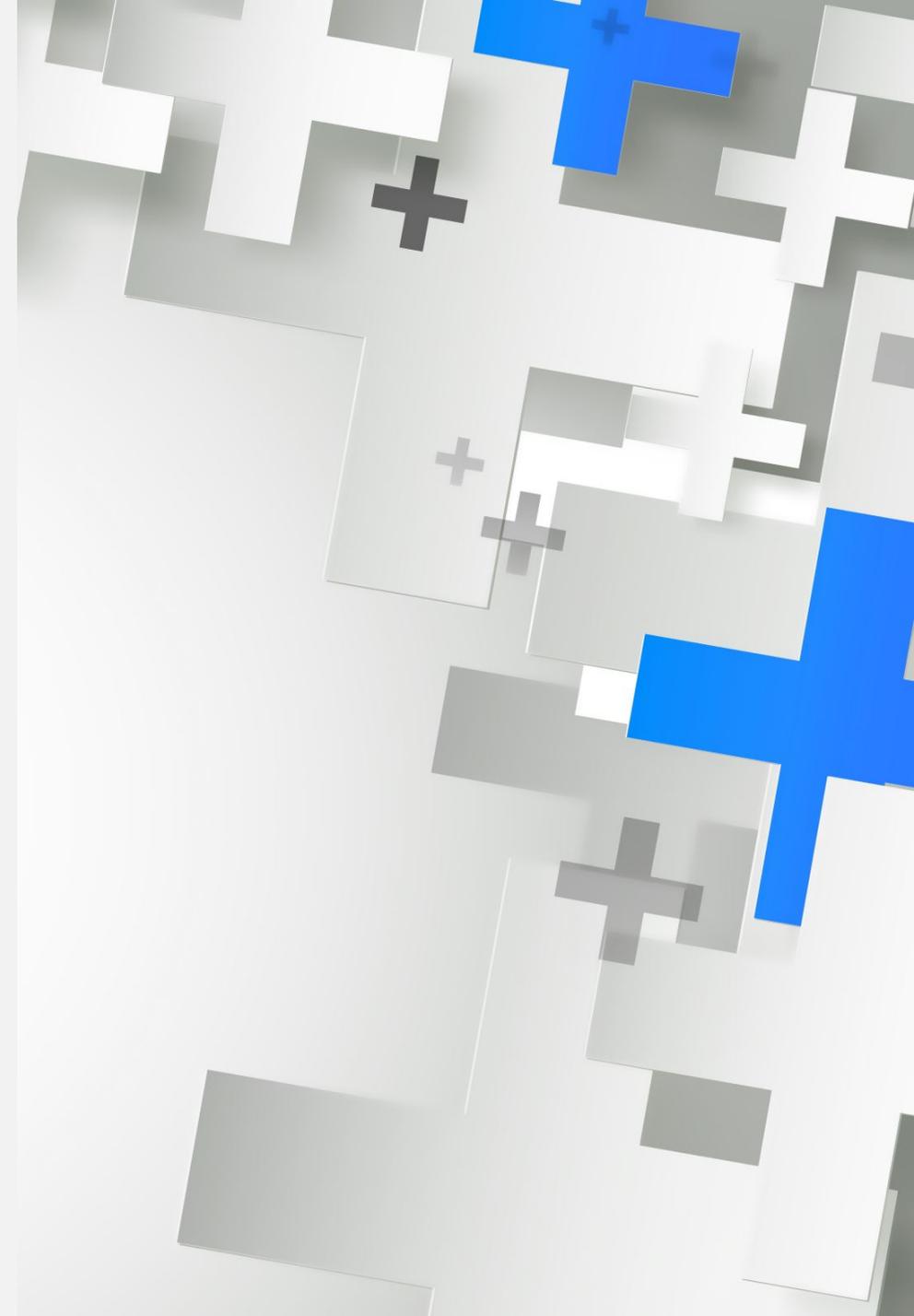
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*Pragmatist and Non-Reductionist Conceptions of Naturalism*

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## AIM OF MY TALK

- To provide an overview of various conceptions of philosophical naturalism from the pragmatist tradition – from its ‘classical’ period to the contemporary ‘New Pragmatist’ period
- To propose that returning to the charged discourse about philosophical naturalism in the U.S. in the 1940s is a launchpad for the next phase of Anglophone philosophical-cum-cultural theoretic critical reflections on naturalism
- The political sociology of naturalism has axiological priority over technical philosophical debates about e- vs. i-representations, subject vs. object naturalism, etc.

## WHAT IS 'NATURALISM'?

- Philosophical naturalism ('naturalism' for short) is the view that the image of the world provided by the natural sciences is all there is to the world (viz. Kim 2003, De Caro & Macarthur 2004, 2010; Giladi 2019)
  - Ontological naturalism
  - Methodological naturalism
  - Scientific naturalism
  - 'Liberal' naturalism(s), 'near-naturalism', 'radical' naturalism, 'critical' naturalism

## WHAT IS 'NATURALISM'?

- Naturalism has been philosophical orthodoxy in the Anglo-American philosophical world almost since the mythopoetic 'founding' of analytic philosophy by Russell & Moore
- Putnam's 2004 remark about a commitment to naturalism as an *auto da fé*
- The respective fates of naturalism and analytic philosophy appear bound up with one another – the development of '*post-analytic philosophy*' as a metaphilosophical case in point (viz. Giladi 2021a, 2021b)

## WHAT IS 'PRAGMATISM'?

- Pragmatism (in)formally originated in the U.S. (though its genealogy may be traced back to Thomas Reid and the Scottish Enlightenment) at the short-lived 'Metaphysical Club' at Cambridge, MA
- Pragmatism is usually seen as America's defining contribution to academic philosophy, to the point that some scholars of pragmatism have articulated an almost ethno-nationalist view of pragmatism: one can't be a pragmatist unless one is American
- Pragmatism, crucially, is NOT a monolithic intellectual bloc – on the contrary, it is self-reflexive and highly complex, true to its commitments to democratic experimentalism and epistemic fallibilism

# THE COMPLEXITY OF PRAGMATISM

- **Classical Pragmatism**

- C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, F.C.S. Schiller, G.H. Mead

- **Post-Classical Pragmatism**

- C.I. Lewis, W.V.O. Quine, Jürgen Habermas

# THE COMPLEXITY OF PRAGMATISM

- **Neopragmatism** (coined by Ian Hacking)
  - Wilfrid Sellars\*, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Robert Brandom
- **New Pragmatism** (coined by Cheryl Misak)
  - Huw Price, David Macarthur, Danielle Macbeth, Stephen Levine, Jeffrey Stout

# PRAGMATISM AND NATURALISM

- All the philosophers listed have something to say about naturalism
- Some classical pragmatists *de facto* equated scientific naturalism – a reductive form of naturalism – with pragmatism
- Some classical pragmatists are only strongly critical of scientific naturalism
- Some neopragmatists express enthusiasm for scientific naturalism (Rorty in 1970 ‘defended’ eliminative materialism)
- Some New Pragmatists are only keen on expressivist and non-metaphysical varieties of liberal naturalism (Price, Macarthur)

## C.S. PEIRCE AND WILLIAM JAMES

- Peirce and James defined themselves as pragmatists – insofar as they were deeply wedded to epistemic fallibilism and to adopting the scientific method as an epistemic and moral-political ideal – but did not describe themselves as naturalists
- Physics was **not** intellectually fetishised by Peirce and James – evolutionary biology was their muse because it was a *clue* to a particularly rich form of epistemic pluralism
- James himself was very hostile to scientific naturalism ('scientism'): such a naturalism denounces teleology in metaphysics while simultaneously entailing it
- All this lays the groundwork for *anti-representationalism*, the core neopragmatist position that was most famously developed by Rorty (1979)

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF JOHN DEWEY

- When Dewey adopted “naturalism” as a label for his *sui generis*, humanist and political variety of pragmatism, he ‘resignified’ an existing term
- Though Dewey wanted to remake philosophy in the image of science *qua* a radical Nietzsche-inspired secularism, he was wedded to naturalism’s realist and antitheological connotations, but staunchly opposed many of his contemporaries’ fondness for reductionism and eliminativism

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF JOHN DEWEY

- Dewey as a 'liberal' naturalist: anticipating John McDowell, he expands the concept of nature to include the full domain of the lifeworld: nature = what is studied by the natural sciences and cultural theory
- There is a need to “test and check”, to also enable “enlargement and enrichment of meaning”

# THE NEW PRAGMATISTS AND NATURALISM

- These philosophers view humans as natural creatures and explain ethical and semantic concepts and vocabulary as features of linguistic social practice
- One need not regard semantic vocabulary as representing a substantive property requiring a metaphysical (but somehow naturalistic) explanation
- New Pragmatist naturalism adopts a “broadly anthropological” strategy and explains truth by displaying its indispensable role in the norm-governed activity constitutive of human linguistic and epistemic practices (Macarthur & Price 2007)
- **Priority of social practices over (substance-)ontology in the order of explanation** – this is also a strong critique of scientific naturalism

# BEYOND TECHNICAL DEBATES

- There is no shortage of discourse to be had about naturalism for metaphysicians, epistemologists, philosophers of mind, philosophers of language, and philosophers of science
- But, at the same time, there is a growing need to make sense of contemporary debates about naturalism in a way that goes beyond the confines of technical debates in sub-fields of *theoretical* philosophy
- Move to revive the discourse about the battles over naturalism in the U.S. in the 1940s especially **as a discourse about ‘civilisation’**
- Current philosophical discourse about naturalism from idealist, phenomenological, Foucauldian, classical pragmatist, neopragmatist, new pragmatist, and mainstream analytic philosophical perspectives, appears to occlude this

## THE 1940 NEW YORK CONFERENCE

- *Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life* held at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City in September 1940
- A clear and powerful example of how naturalism and American humanism became so intimately connected and politically framed – viz. Weldon (2020)

## THE 1940 NEW YORK CONFERENCE

- On the one hand, scientific naturalism had been modelled as the exact sort of epistemically, morally, and politically virtuous democratic experimentalist sensibility, one which is symptomatic of Dewey's pragmatism and its approach to fixing both inquiry and 'the situation'
- On the other hand – and crucially, before Stanley Cavell and Rorty respectively entered the conceptual field here – many American theorists contended that Deweyan democracy and experimental educational *praxis* are stymied by the ascendancy of scientific naturalism

## SOME POWERFUL QUESTIONS

- Is a society pervaded by naturalisms ultimately an environment in which democracy thrives?
- Do naturalisms, epistemic fallibilism, and methodological pluralism represent the antechamber of fascisms? (Viz. Mortimer J. Adler, Pitirim Sorokin)
- The stakes have significantly risen because there is now a moral perfectionist discourse at the intersection of philosophy, politics, social theory, and cultural theory

## BEYOND TECHNICAL DEBATES

- “Naturalists mobilised together to respond to the allegations of the [1940] Conference, promoting conventions, manifestos, and publications. But, as a matter of fact, naturalism had already been the dominant voice of U.S. academia, and this event made it even stronger. By 1945, and with the international leadership meanwhile assumed by the U.S., naturalism achieved a new symbolic dimension, for it had now crossed the threshold of a theory and it rather became the symbol of the dominant values of American democratic and liberal society. Not only that, but it became the emblem of the “free world”, and as such it also became an export commodity” - Nunziante (forthcoming)

**ARTHUR E. MURPHY'S REVIEW OF**  
**YERVANT H. KRIKORIAN (ED.)**  
***NATURALISM AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT***

- “[N]aturalists seem at times to be maintaining that no one can differ from them on this specifically philosophical issue without thereby showing himself to be at least a crypto-fascist and enemy of free inquiry” (Murphy 1945: 404)