

Philip Kitcher

Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy.

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This book collects seventeen of Philip Kitcher's essays from the past two decades. All but two have been published elsewhere, and several are quite well-known. 'The Naturalists Return', for example, appeared in *Philosophical Review's* 1992 centennial issue, and is a staple of reading lists in epistemology and the philosophy of science. But the book frames these essays in a valuable new way. In the period from which these essays are drawn, Kitcher moved steadily toward an embrace of pragmatism, and the book presents them as milestones in this development: tentative applications of pragmatist ideas to a range of topics. Hence the word 'prelude'. Kitcher says that he is not yet ready to present a 'fully developed pragmatic naturalist position' and that he is merely giving 'pointers' toward such a position (xvi-xvii). But this modesty does not do justice to the sophistication of his pragmatism. *Preludes to Pragmatism* is a rich and rewarding book that will interest philosophers of many different stripes. It may also prove to be an important contribution to the history of pragmatism.

The book's lengthy introduction puts the essays in context. Kitcher seems surprised to have wound up a pragmatist. 'Two decades ago', he writes, 'I would have seen the three canonical pragmatists—Peirce, James, and Dewey—as well-intentioned but benighted, laboring with crude tools to develop ideas that were far more rigorously and exactly shaped by... what is (unfortunately) known as "analytic" philosophy' (xi). Now, however, he sees pragmatism as 'one of the most significant developments in the history of the subject, comparable... to the celebrated turning points in the seventeenth century and in the wake of Kant' (xi). This change of heart is linked to a reassessment of what the classical pragmatists are doing. Like Richard Rorty, Kitcher thinks they should not be seen as giving new answers to old questions—questions about the nature of truth, for example. Rather, the classical pragmatists are important because they question our need for theories of such things. They think philosophers should address the burning issues of their time, issues that require them to 'organize the knowledge of [their] age so it can more directly benefit [their] contemporaries' (xiii). The reference to age is crucial. In Kitcher's view, philosophy emerges from an 'impulse that is central to human nature', but this impulse 'must express itself very differently at different stages of intellectual, social, and cultural history' (xiv). On some level, it seems, most great philosophers have understood this. Descartes' method of doubt might seem like a non-starter to us, but it was a perfectly reasonable response to the intellectual turmoil of his age. However, 'were Descartes to be resurrected' (xv), Kitcher writes, he would be baffled to see how his response continues to set the agenda for much contemporary epistemology. A resurrected Descartes would be 'far more interested in the neglected issue of how to provide access to reliable information in a world awash in potential sources' (xv)—the key epistemological challenge of *our* time.

Kitcher's pragmatism resembles Rorty's in several other ways. Like Rorty, he thinks that James and Dewey, rather than Peirce, are the crucial figures in the pragmatic tradition. Also like Rorty, he rejects the idea of a world's own language—or as he puts it, 'Nature's Own

Vocabulary' (109). Kitcher insists that there are 'no privileged ways to divide the world into objects and kinds' and that 'human beings make divisions in nature that reflect their psychological constitutions and their (mutable) purposes' (108). That said, Kitcher is a less iconoclastic pragmatist than Rorty. Rorty can be dismissive of science, but Kitcher thinks pragmatism is compatible with 'a modest and defensible' (72) realism that takes 'the claims of the most successful sciences at face value' (128). Furthermore, Rorty suggests that contemporary philosophical malaise has a single source, which he calls 'representationalism'. Kitcher disagrees, insisting that all philosophical traditions tend to ossify, and for a variety of reasons. But the biggest difference is that Rorty sometimes suggests that philosophy has exhausted its possibilities and should be replaced by something else—something like literary criticism. Kitcher is more optimistic. He thinks philosophy has a bright future, albeit one that 'should be unlike (most of) the recent past' (xiv). Like Dewey, Kitcher thinks philosophy can and should be reconstructed.

The first essay, the wonderful 'The Importance of Dewey for Philosophy (and for Much Else Besides)', gives more detail about this reconstructive program. Its aim is to help 'focus philosophy on issues that matter to people' (xii), and Kitcher gives an explicit criterion for identifying such issues. According to this criterion, a question is genuinely significant if it is one that would be pursued by 'well-ordered inquiry': one that would be 'deemed as significant by a group of deliberators representing all human circumstances and points of view, all thoroughly informed as to the existing state of human knowledge and to the foreseeable prospects for developing it further, and all fully committed to mutual engagement with one another' (8). This ideal, invoked throughout the book, rules out idiosyncratic inquiries that 'give priority to the wishes or to the whimsical interests of the few, at the cost to the many' (8). But it also rules out inquiries arising from ignorance of 'the existing state of human knowledge' (9), inquiries such as those bound up with denials of evolution or climate change (380). Well-ordered inquiry does not subordinate expertise to a tyranny of the majority, but instead 'thrives on the combination of expertise' (9).

The remaining essays fall into several categories. Some, particularly the older ones, deal with fairly mainstream issues in epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of science. 'The Naturalists Return' gives a detailed survey of epistemology from the 1960s to the 1980s. 'Real Realism' presents a novel, modest response to anti-realism in the philosophy of science, one that is inspired by Galileo's defense of the telescope. Kitcher's pragmatism is hardest to detect in these early essays, but it is still there. The first essay is pragmatic in that it conceives of epistemology as a 'meliorative project' (xviii), while the second 'eschews any grand metaphysical premises in favor of a return to the everyday experiences of ordinary people' (xxi). Several of the remaining essays discuss figures and themes from the pragmatist tradition. 'A Pragmatist's Progress', for instance, reflects thoughtfully on the seemingly conflicting things James says about religion. Other essays continue Kitcher's longstanding attempt to develop a naturalistic ethics of the sort proposed by Dewey. 'Naturalistic Ethics Without Fallacies' reflects on the relation between truth and moral progress; 'The Hall of Mirrors' enlists ideas from Adam Smith; and 'Varieties of Altruism' uses game theory to clarify a central concept of naturalistic ethics. All three help flesh out a Deweyan account of 'values and valuing' (xxx).

Finally, a number of essays—and the ones I find most valuable—take up the pragmatic task of thinking through the ‘pervasive difficulties’ (xiv) of our own age. ‘Public Knowledge and its Discontents’ examines the ‘Google/Wikipedia problem’ (xv): the ways in which publicly available knowledge can both help and fail to help societies pursue their goals. ‘Challenges for Secularism’ and ‘Militant Modern Atheism’ offer a view of religion that is more subtle than the one advanced by the new atheists, while challenging secular thinkers ‘to develop ways of sustaining [spiritual experiences]... that will be as powerful as those supplied by long-evolved religious traditions’ (286). ‘Education, Democracy, and Capitalism’ asks whether a Deweyan approach to education can thrive in an era of global capitalism. It closes with the tantalizing (and perhaps revolutionary) suggestion that contemporary philosophy should ‘expose as precisely as possible the sources of conflict between capitalism, as we now have it, and Dewey’s ambitious project’, and on that basis, ‘conceive of ways of modifying the economic constraints’ (362).

Supporters of pragmatism should greet this book enthusiastically. Pragmatism is sometimes criticized for getting sidetracked in metaphilosophy rather than dirtying its hands in concrete problems. But Kitcher’s book is an appealing blend of vision and argument. It makes inspiring pronouncements about philosophy’s mission, but it also makes rigorous and fine-grained contributions to ethics, epistemology, the philosophies of the sciences, and many other areas. Kitcher embodies Dewey’s vision of ‘synthetic philosophy’, in which ‘the philosopher’s reading is not limited to the writings of contemporary specialists in their home sub-branch of the academic profession, but [draws] widely from many areas’ (xv). Indeed, Kitcher’s erudition is dizzying—as one would expect from the author of books on both genetics and Wagner’s *Ring*. I suspect few readers will follow everything he says here. But *Preludes to Pragmatism* will appeal even to pragmatists with little interest in the specific problems it discusses because it demonstrates something important about the state of pragmatism. It is common to divide contemporary pragmatists into ‘new pragmatists’ inspired by Peirce and ‘neo-pragmatists’ like Rorty. The new pragmatists are often seen as more philosophically serious than the neo-pragmatists: harder-nosed, less literary, more respectful of science. Kitcher exposes the inadequacy of this scheme. It is hard to imagine a more rigorous problem-solver, or one more respectful of science. But Kitcher also agrees with Rorty that the most important pragmatists are James and Dewey, and that philosophy needs to change dramatically. In this way, he helps show that contemporary pragmatism is more diverse, and more interesting, than is often assumed.

This leads me to the book’s biggest omission. As I have said, Kitcher makes only passing references to Peirce, and almost none to contemporary Peirceans such as Cheryl Misak and Susan Haack. I find this strange. The return of Peirce, to use Michael Bacon’s phrase, is one of the most noteworthy developments in the recent history of pragmatism. I would be interested to know what Kitcher thinks of Peirce. I would be even more interested to know what he thinks of the new pragmatists—especially since several of them seem to view philosophy quite differently than he does. This is not a defect in *Preludes to Pragmatism*. The book does so much so well that it would be churlish to ask for more. In any case, the book is intended to be a series of preludes rather than a fully developed statement of Kitcher’s pragmatism. But when that statement comes, I hope it says more about Peirce and the new pragmatists.

One mark of a book’s success is how eager it leaves its readers for a sequel. By that standard—and by many others as well—*Preludes to Pragmatism* is a smashing success.

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