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Hilary Putnam

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ion

XX*-PRAGMATISM by Hilary Putnam pragmatism is a very large subject. My aim in this essay is not a survey, and certainly not an over-all evaluation of the movement's insights and errors. Instead, I want to examine those insights and errors with respect to just one issue-an issue which was of central importance to the pragmatists, but by no means only to the pragmatists: verificationism.

The pragmatistform of verificationism and how it differedfrom the positivist form. Although textbooks tend to treat pragmatism primarily as a theory of truth (and to identify it with the theory that the true is what is satisfying in the long-run to believe, a theory that not one of the classical pragmatist actually heldly, it is important to remember that the principle that the classical pragmatists actually regarded as basic was Peirce's so-called 'pragmatic maxim' and that the theories of truth that Peirce and James advanced were regarded by them simply as applications of this maxim. Here is the maxim as

the theories of until that Perice and dames advanced were regarded by them simply as a pilications of this maxim. Here is the maxim as stated by Peirce himself:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. The nour conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of

our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.

*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society, held in the Senior Common Room, Birkbeck College, London, on Monday, 19th June, 1995 at 8.15 p.m.

If he pragmatist who is supposed to have held this theory most explicitly is, of course, William James. For an account of the extremely complicated view that James actually had, see my James' Theory of Truth forthcoming in The Cambridge Companion to William James, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam.

2 ?402 of 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshome and Paul Weiss, vol. 5 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). Further references to this edition will have the by-now-standard form for lume number: paragraph number). volume number: paragraph number).

In the paragraph that precedes the statement of the pragmatic maxim [5401], Peirce identifies these 'effects that might have practical bearing' with 'sensible effects'. And his application of the maxim in that paragraph (a criticism of the Catholic doctrine of the 'real presence' of Jesus' flesh and blood in the Eucharist) shows that he takes the pragmatic maxim to imply that there can be no difference in conceptions where there is no difference in the sensible effects that we suppose would obtain if one or the other of those conceptions were to be correct. All this sounds very much like the logical positivists' verification principle', and, indeed, Carnap and Reichenbach assumed that that was more or less what the pragmatists had be entrying to state. Yet there are a number of important differences between the ways in which the pragmatists understood their maxim and the ways in which the positivists understood their maxim and principle.

the ways in which the pragmatists understood their maxim and the ways in which the positivists understood the verification principle.

First of all, although it later moved away from its initial phenomenalism, logical positivism began with the idea that knowledge must be reduced to the knowledge (by the subject, conceived of as a single isolated individual) of sense data, which were initially conceived of as a 'given' incorrigible foundation. The movement was committed to the epistemological priority of the "Eigenpsychisch' and to 'methodological solipsism'.3 (As Neurath remarked, it is hard to explain how 'methodological solipsism' differs from real solipsism). Secondly, logical positivism began with the idea that to be meaningful an idea must be capable of conclusive verification. (In 1936-7 C amap described how the positivists moved away from this position-and one sees from his account what a struggle that took!)4

Such ideas were anathema to the pragmatists from the beginning. As early (1868) as his 'Guestions C oncerning C ertain Faculties

Claimed for Man' [5:213-263], Peirce claimed that 'We have no Power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by typ othetical reasoning from our knowledge of external 3 Rudolf C armap, Der Logische Aufbau der Welt (Hamburg: Meiner, 1961); unaltered reprint of the 1928 text.

4 Testability and Meaning', Philosophy of Science, Vol.3, 1936,419-471 and Vol.4, 1937, 1-40.













