

(Abstract for a presentation at the Nordic Pragmatism Workshop 14-15 May 2009)

Abstract

Pluralistic pragmatism and – pluralistic? – naturalism

Bengt Molander, Department of Philosophy NTNU

For pragmatism reality is still in the making, William James says; this is unfortunately also true about my paper for the conference. However, this is what I want to present.

The best definition of naturalism, or rather “naturalistic worldview” I have found in the article “Naturalism in ethics” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: it is a worldview that “takes the emerging scientific picture of the world as approximately accurate and that rejects belief in the supernatural”. The paper starts with a discussion of various senses of naturalism and I defend the one above as a fruitful one for the purpose of the paper.

The main goal of the paper is to critically discuss naturalism from the perspective of William James’ *Pragmatism* and to develop a more radical understanding of knowledge in a pragmatic sense.

Pragmatism, James says, “is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or reason, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him.” This indicates one of several, possibly productive, tensions in James’ version of pragmatism. I will discuss some of the main tensions and his pluralist solution, which is not final because it is a sort of “pluralistic monism”.

William James’ idea of truth (or truths) as “what works best in the way of leading us” is a good basis for understanding human knowledge (or the most basic kind of such knowledge). I will argue, however, that there is an unresolved dualism between thinking and acting in his philosophy. I therefore try to develop his epistemology – and going beyond it. My argument is twofold.

The first part builds on Wittgenstein’s ideas about acting as (in a sense) basic in our language-games and in our life. I refer in particular to *On Certainty* (“Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of our language-game.”)

The second part is an argument intended to show that knowledge-in-action is the most basic kind of knowledge and that (the most basic?) beliefs get their content, and even existence, by being incorporated in our activities. Thus, beliefs in a pragmatist understanding are not just beliefs *about* practical consequences or rules *for* acting. I will try to make this argument as general as possible. The argument is essentially based on examples or cases. The status of my argument also depends on what a “theory of” knowledge is; I make some remarks about that towards the end.

Finally I will ask the question whether my account is naturalist or not, and if it is, what kind of naturalist I am.