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Morton White: A Philosophy of Culture

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I



Holistic Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Culture

MY PURPOSE IN THIS BOOK IS TO PRESENT A philosophical discussion of the main elements of civilization or culture such as science, law, religion, politics, art, and history, a discussion in which I expound and defend a holistic, empirical, and pragmatic approach. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, William James and John Dewey prepared the way for pragmatic inquiry into the elements of culture that was further developed in the second half of the century by W. V. Quine's writings on the method of logic and the natural sciences, by Nelson Goodman's work in the philosophy of art, by John Rawls's work in ethics, and by my own writings in ethics and the philosophy of history. I focus on this work and also on the earlier views of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in legal philosophy while illustrating what I call holistic pragmatism.

That doctrine was succinctly formulated by Quine in his famous 1951 paper, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," when he wrote: "Each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic."¹ In several ways, this statement is espe-

¹ W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 46; originally published in *Philosophical Review* 60 (January 1951).

cially significant. First of all, it is about the behavior of human beings and their heritage, and is for that reason about a cultural phenomenon. Second, a scientific heritage is regarded as a conjunction of many beliefs rather than as one nonconjunctive belief, thereby indicating that the view is holistic. Third, the reference to a barrage of sensory stimulation or a flux of experience indicates the empiricism of the view. Fourth, the reference to the pragmatic warping of a scientific heritage to fit sensory promptings shows that the view is in the tradition of pragmatism. According to holistic pragmatism, scientists' warpings are carried out with concern for the elegance or simplicity of the theory they adopt and with the intention to warp the heritage conservatively—that is, by engaging in what James calls minimum modification of it and what Quine calls minimum mutilation of it.

Holistic pragmatism is primarily opposed to the doctrine of classical rationalism, which holds that we have knowledge that is not tested by experience. This opposition is illustrated in the attack on the logical positivists' distinction between analytic and synthetic statements leveled by Quine, by Alfred Tarski, by Nelson Goodman, and by myself in ways that will be amplified later. Instead of claiming, as logical positivists did, that all truths of logic are analytic because they are true by virtue of the meanings of their terms and therefore not tested by sensory experience, holistic philosophers argue that because a scientific theory is a conjunction of logical statements and statements of natural science, a scientist's sensory experience may lead him to reject even a logical component of that conjunction in an effort to make the scientific theory fit those specific sensory promptings. In addition, holistic pragmatists reject the positivists' distinction between so-called analytic statements of essential predication, such as "All men are rational animals", and so-called synthetic statements, such as "All men are featherless bipeds". Holistic pragmatists hold that this positivistic distinction rests on the obscure view that "men" is synonymous with "rational animals" but not synonymous with "featherless bipeds". Finally, holistic prag-

matists maintain that statements of ontology or metaphysics—for example, the statement that there are universals such as the class of men—are also conjuncts of a holistically conceived scientific theory that is pragmatically warped to fit sensory experience.

I come now to some relations between my own views and those held by Quine. I agree with most of Quine's characterization of the way in which natural scientists warp their heritage, but I do not think as Quine does that philosophy of natural science is philosophy enough—a restrictive view that, I believe, is a remnant of the logical positivism or empiricism against which he reacted in “Two Dogmas”. So while I agree with him that natural science is a cultural institution whose workings a philosopher may study, I think that the philosopher may also study other institutions, most notably morality, and I treat moral thinking holistically. I believe that our scientific heritage contains not only beliefs of logic and natural science but moral beliefs as well, since I believe that a moral judge tries to organize a flux consisting of feelings of moral obligation as well as of sensory experiences. John Rawls adopts a similar view in his work on justice; and I believe that Goodman engages in pragmatic holistic thinking in his philosophy of art and that it also goes on in the philosophy of history and the philosophy of law. In my view, we may distinguish different disciplines associated with various elements of culture on the basis of their different vocabularies and substantive statements, but not by saying that we use fundamentally different methods in supporting those statements.

A FEW HISTORICAL OBSERVATIONS WILL, I THINK, MAKE THE MOTIVATION of holistic pragmatism clearer. It is primarily a reaction against the rationalism espoused by Descartes when he said that at least some truths of natural science may be established by pure reason along with the truths of pure mathematics, by Locke when he defended the doctrine that ethics is a demonstrative science that he likened to pure mathematics, by Kant when he tried to support moral truths as necessary and *a priori*, and by Hegel in places where

he seems to spin out a theory of historical development by using pure reason. And while Hume opposed Locke's rationalism in ethics and Descartes's rationalism in the philosophy of religion, as Mill did in political philosophy when he rejected the doctrine of natural rights, in my view neither Hume nor Mill went far enough in their rejection of rationalism. Hume explicitly advocated a sharp distinction between two kinds of truth much like the logical positivists' later distinction between analytic and synthetic truth, and Mill thought that attributes or concepts are analyzed when we support essential predications that, he said, correspond to what Kant calls analytic judgments.²

In addition to these earlier figures, a number of empirically oriented philosophers of the early twentieth century were part-time rationalists. For example, Pierre Duhem, an early advocate of holism in the philosophy of physics, accepted a sharp epistemic distinction between physical and mathematical truth. And while we shall see that Bertrand Russell once said with apparent approval that William James was what I would call a holistic pragmatist, James inconsistently maintained a sharp distinction between *a priori* and empirical truth in *Pragmatism*, and Russell himself abandoned holistic pragmatism later on. Moreover, John Dewey, in some ways the most anti-dualistic philosopher of culture in the twentieth century, also seemed to accept a distinction between two kinds of truth that was rationalistic.³

The philosophers I have just mentioned were not alone in succumbing to the attractions of rationalism, whether full-fledged or half-fledged. They were joined by many philosophically oriented writers on culture who are not usually associated with rationalism. For example, in the nineteenth century Ludwig Feuerbach, who

² J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence, and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto, 1973), book I, chap. 6, sec. 5 (1:116 n. 62).

³ See "Experiment and Necessity in Dewey's Philosophy," in my *Pragmatism and the American Mind: Essays and Reviews in Philosophy and Intellectual History* (New York, 1973), pp. 138–54.

called himself an anthropologist of religion, claimed to have discovered the essence of Christianity by a method that is rationalistic, and Friedrich Nietzsche, also a critic of rationalism, claimed to know the essence of life and value. A Marxist like Friedrich Engels thought—whether with Marx’s approval is not clear—he could deduce a philosophy of history—historical materialism—from dialectical materialism, thereby trying to do for history what Descartes tried to do for physics and Locke tried to do for ethics.

It is an irony of intellectual history that many of the half-rationalists I have mentioned were psychologists or social scientists who might have been expected to reject rationalism root and branch. Hume was a psychologist and historian; Mill was an economist and political theorist; many Marxists have been economists or historians; Nietzsche called himself a psychologist; and James and Dewey wrote books devoted to psychology. Most of them were empirically oriented humanists in the broad sense of that term, waving the anti-rationalistic banners of romanticism, positivism, materialism, and pragmatism and yet reserving a role for pure, nonempirical reason in their thinking. The irony of their being half-rationalists helps explain why it took twentieth-century philosophers so long to escape the influence of what Dewey called “the quest for certainty,” an irony that was increased by the fact that he seems to have taken part in that quest. The emergence of a thoroughgoing holistic pragmatism was impeded not only by wide acceptance of Cartesian rationalism and half-rationalism, but also by wide acceptance in the twentieth century of views on *a priori* knowledge held by the analytic philosophers Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, C. I. Lewis, and Rudolf Carnap. All of these distinguished philosophers accepted versions of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, though Moore voiced doubts about its clarity toward the end of his life.

In concluding this introductory chapter, I want to say a few words about how one may move from the view that philosophy of science is philosophy enough to the view that philosophy is philosophy of culture. If epistemology is in great measure a descriptive psychologi-

cal account of the cultural institution of scientific thinking that leads epistemologists to promulgate a rule governing it, we may say that they give a descriptive and a normative account of moral thinking. While the natural scientist tries to work a manageable structure into a flux of sensory experience, I believe the moralist tries to work a manageable structure into a flux composed of both sensory experiences and feelings of moral obligation. And while doing so, the moralist may warp her heritage—which includes moral statements as well as logical statements and factual statements that she believes with different degrees of confidence—to fit her sensory and emotional promptings. I think Rawls does something like this when he seeks to arrive at what he calls reflective equilibrium; certainly Goodman does when he moves back and forth from rules of inference to accepted inferences in an effort to arrive at such equilibrium. We shall also see that when Goodman abandons the question “What is the essence of art?” for the question “What are the symptoms of art?” he treats philosophy of art as an empirical inquiry. So, once we regard the philosophy of science as the philosophy of one element of culture, we may say that there are other elements of culture that may be studied from a holistic, empirical, and pragmatic point of view. In the next two chapters I begin by discussing the views of James on religion and those of Dewey on art; for in spite of their occasional lapses into rationalism, they are progenitors of more recent efforts to broaden the scope of philosophy from an examination of logic and physics to an empirical examination of other elements of civilization or culture.