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From Analytic Philosophy to an Ampler and More Flexible Pragmatism:

Muhammad Asghari talks with Susan Haack

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Muhammad Asghari

Associate Professor of Philosophy at the university of Tabriz.- Iran.

m-asghari@Tabrizu.ac.ir



Susan Haack

Distinguished Professor in the Humanities, Professor of Philosophy, Professor of Law, University of Miami, USA.

shaack@law.miami.edu

Abstract

In this interview, which took place in July 2020, Muhammad Asghari, an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tabriz, asked eleven questions (via email) to Professor Susan Haack, a distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of Miami. This American philosopher eagerly and patiently emailed me the answers to the questions. The questions in this interview are mainly about analytic philosophy and pragmatist philosophy.

Keywords: pragmatism, Innocent Realism, philosophy,

This interview was conducted via personal email between me and Professor Susan Haack in July 2020. This interview, which Professor Haack eagerly accepted, includes eleven questions about her biography and roles of various philosophers in her thought and finally about the influence of the philosophy of pragmatism on her thought. Of course, it goes without saying that the Haack's book *Philosophy of Logic in Iran* has been translated into Persian¹ and he has published two articles² in the quarterly journal of *Philosophical Investigations* (University of Tabriz) and I also have translated one of her articles into Persian. What was most interesting to me was the influence of pragmatism on Haack's thought that Charles Sanders Peirce, among classical American pragmatists, had as much influence on this philosopher's thought as John Dewey had in Rorty's thought. Here I thank Professor Susan Haack for answering my questions patiently and eagerly.

This interview was conducted by Muhammad Ashgari, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tabriz-Iran, with Professor Susan Haack, Distinguished Professor in the Humanities, Cooper Senior Scholar in Arts and Sciences, Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Law, University of Miami. Haack's books and articles have been published in 16 languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, French, Chinese, Korean, Croatian, and even Farsi.

MA: Let's start with your brief biography, how you came to philosophy, and which philosophers contributed to your ideas, and still have some continuing influence.

SH: My undergraduate degree (from Oxford) was in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics; but I chose this with no clear idea what philosophy was, primarily because of my interest in politics and economics. At the end of my degree program, my politics tutor encouraged me to go to graduate school in politics; but by then I was sure that philosophy would interest me for a lifetime, so I chose that instead: first the B.Phil. at Oxford, then the Ph.D. at Cambridge.

1. Haack, Susan (2019) "The Real Question: Can Philosophy Be Saved?" Trans. Muhammad Asghari (in Persian) in journal of *Elahiyat* (Theology) issue 1, vol1.2019. Also fulltext in her personal academia homepage:

https://www.academia.edu/39288670/The_Real_Question_Can_Philosophy_Be_Saved_2019_in_Persian

2. see her articles in this journal:

Haack, Susan (2019) "Personal or Impersonal Knowledge?" in the quarterly journal of *Philosophical Investigations* (Volume 13, Issue 28 Autumn 2019/Pages 21-44) https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir/article_9430_en.html

Haack, Susan (2018) "Five Answers on Pragmatism" in the quarterly journal of *Philosophical Investigations* (Volume 12, Issue 24/Autumn 2018/Pages 1-14)

https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir/article_7990_en.html

At Oxford, I had many good teachers. Jean Austin, widow of J. L. Austin, was my first philosophy tutor; and later I studied Plato with Gilbert Ryle, logic with Michael Dummett, ethics with Philippa Foot, philosophy of language with David Pears, etc.

In Cambridge, where I wrote my Ph.D. under Timothy Smiley, I benefited particularly from the presence of Elizabeth Anscombe and Ian Hacking. Anscombe was never my teacher, but she educated me by coming to lunch in the woman's college to which we were both attached, checking to see I was there, and then saying something completely outrageous, like "nothing interesting was ever written on the philosophy of science." I would protest; she would respond; and so on. I got indigestion, but I learned a lot!

But the most important influences have been from those I have read: of course, the old pragmatists—Peirce, James, Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Oliver Wendell Holmes—but also many, many others: Plato, John Locke, Francis Bacon, John Stuart Mill, Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, for example. And not all, by any means, are philosophers: mathematician W.K. Clifford, physicist Percy Bridgman, and biologist Thomas Huxley have left their mark, for example, and so have many novelists.

MA: Were you influenced by “continental” philosophers at all?

SH: I don't think so; I have read very little in that tradition.

However, perhaps you are noticing that I have always thought, from the very beginning, that philosophy should seek both clarity and depth, both precision and breadth. The problem, of course, is to combine the two.

MA: You have tackled issues in philosophy of logic, epistemology, metaphysics, etc. But you first became famous in the world of analytical philosophy for your books *Deviant Logic* (1974) and *Philosophy of Logics* (1978), while your writings today have less in common with the analytic mainstream than with classical pragmatism. In the recent article “The World and How We Know It” (2018) you write of the gradual evolution of your thought. Could we speak of the early and the later Haack, as of the early and the later Wittgenstein?

SH: The last part of your question makes it sound too much as if I shifted abruptly from supporting one football team to rooting for another! It wasn't like that at all. I started doing philosophy the way I was taught and the way others around me did it; but gradually, gradually, as I matured, I found my own way. This way was indeed informed by the work of the classical pragmatists; but from my very first book (*Deviant Logic*, 1974) my work always had a pragmatist element; and it has never lost the analytic concern for clarity and rigor, or my early interest in disambiguation.

Your question also makes it sound as if analytic philosophy were one, monolithic approach. It wasn't. Some in this big tent were focused on natural language; some on formal, regimented languages; and some not on language but on our concepts. Think how different Frege was from Austin, for example, or Strawson from Quine.

Moreover, you ignore that fact that over the years self-styled “analytic” philosophy has changed quite radically, and is now very far from its glory days. The old meticulous concern with language is now, to say the least, rare. And neo-analytic philosophy is now fragmented into many tiny niches, and has become not just neglectful of but downright hostile to the history of philosophy, and to real-life problems. By now, it is often infected with scientism, and often, also, formalistic without any real rigor: with elaborate apparatus but flimsy

underpinnings. Indeed, sometimes it seems there's not much more to self-styled "analytic" philosophy today than a pseudo-rigorous manner, a liking for numbered theses and unhelpful definitions, and a certain self-image. I have come to think of it as a dying paradigm that has come, unfortunately, to be institutionally entrenched, the *modus operandi* of the "prestigious" departments and journals.

MA: When and why did you move away from the analytic mainstream, and are there still elements of that approach in your later work?

SH: I have already answered this question, at least in part. It was a gradual process, prompted mostly by my own philosophical development and reading, but in part by my dismay at the degeneration of the mainstream.

But I can identify roughly when and why I began reading the old pragmatists seriously, rather than relying on excerpts and secondary sources. It was in the early 1970s (when I was teaching at the University of Warwick, U.K.). I was reading Quine's *Word and Object*, and was struck by his very causal dismissal of Peirce's account of truth; so I went to the library, took out all 8 (!) volumes of Peirce's *Collected Papers*, and started reading.

No one heard from me for about six weeks; and then I emerged from my study saying, "my goodness, I just found a goldmine!" Peirce's really was a truly remarkable mind. It was a revelation to discover a philosopher who could be broad and deep at the same time; who wrote in real, human prose, not the stilted language of professional philosophy; who could call on an encyclopedic knowledge both of the history of science and of the history of philosophy; and who had so many startling and novel insights. Moreover, he was as rigorous as the heroes of analytic philosophy, but vastly broader. I felt an immediate affinity with his repudiation of false dichotomies, and soon saw the importance of his neologisms, which enabled him to break out of old, false assumptions.

Later, I began reading James seriously. He hadn't Peirce's logical *noûs*, I discovered, but he not only wrote with extraordinary warmth and charm, but also had remarkably shrewd insights into human nature and its quirks. Then I tried Dewey: long-winded, sometimes maddeningly vague and ambiguous, but with truly remarkable range, and an admirable willingness to get involved in "problems of men." George Herbert Mead was tougher at first, his prose at times almost impenetrable; but in the end he proved enormously rewarding, a great source of insight into human mindedness and its evolutionary roots.

Later yet, when I got interested in legal philosophy, I turned to Oliver Wendell Holmes. He was formidable at first, and I had to persist, learning legal subtleties as I went along; moreover, he had been seriously misinterpreted, I discovered, by many commentators. But eventually he too became a valued intellectual companion.

In sum, I found in the old pragmatists a treasure-trove of ideas, richer and ampler than anything I previously encountered—and have been learning from them ever since.

MA: Can you tell us more about what, specifically, you learned from the old pragmatists?

SH: Yes, I can try. But I should start by saying that I don't accept any idea because it's pragmatist; rather, when I think things through, I find the old pragmatists' attitudes, ideas, and approaches helpful. That said:

- I learned, for example, from Peirce's combination of fallibilism and a "high faith in the reality of knowledge," not to imagine that dogmatism and skepticism were the only possibilities; I learned valuable lessons for my own metaphysical approach from his reflections on the meaning of "real"; I began to appreciate that, like him, I had always looked for continuities; I realized, reflecting on his many neologisms and his thoughts about the growth of meaning, the many limitations of logical formalism and the importance of conceptual innovation; and (quite recently) I saw how his idea of philosophy as empirical, but as depending on close attention to everyday experience, not the on *recherché* experience sought by the sciences, why it can seem that philosophy can be done purely *a priori*, but it can't.

- I learned, for example, from James's unconventional reflections a different way of looking at ethics (and, later, the law), and was helped in my thinking about the relation of philosophy and literature. And as you can see in my "The Differences that Make a Difference" (2011), I learned a lot from his defense of the importance of individuals, including how to resist the group-think taking over the American academy.

- I learned from Dewey, for example, a way of thinking of the continuity of the sciences with everyday inquiry, and more about ethics. Of course, I acquired his splendid phrase for the false dichotomies all the pragmatists shunned: "untenable dualisms." He helped me think about education, the slipperiness of the concept of democracy and its abuse by authoritarian regimes, and even about art.

- My thinking about mind and language was helped immeasurably by Mead's earlier, clumsily expressed but very insightful, efforts.

- And my thinking about the law as a constantly evolving human institution owes a great deal to Holmes.

MA: Do you admire Rorty, also a pragmatist? What are the differences between your pragmatism and Rorty's?

SH: No, I emphatically don't admire Rorty! In fact, I was perhaps Rorty's most effective critic—even mentioned in his obituary as such!

In my view, what Rorty offered was a confused farrago of vaguely post-modern ideas under the grossly misleading label "pragmatism." He dismissed Peirce, perhaps the best philosophical mind America has ever produced, as a "whacked-out triadomaniac" whose only contribution to pragmatism was to give it its name; my "We Pragmatists: Peirce and Rorty in Conversation" (1996) shows how Peirce and Rorty disagreed about practically everything; and that Peirce's is by far the better mind.

Rorty didn't understand even Dewey, whom he most professed to admire, but on the contrary kept offering us what Dewey would have known were absurdly false dichotomies. Either truth is Correspondence to Things in Themselves, or it is just what you can defend against all conversational objections; either philosophy is the handmaid of the sciences, or it is nothing but another genre of literature; etc., etc. In short, as I pointed out in *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993) and argued in detail in "Pining Away in the Midst of Plenty" (2016), his whole philosophy is infected with a pernicious This-or-Nothingism.

So PLEASE don't confuse me with Rorty! Ironically, I'm not given to describing myself as a pragmatist, though I have often said my work is informed by classical pragmatism. Rorty, however, is quick to claim the label, but what he offers really isn't recognizable as pragmatism at all. We had nothing in common, except perhaps a sense that the analytic paradigm of philosophy was in trouble.

In brief, our deep disagreements include:

- I think philosophy is a form of inquiry; Rorty denies this, claiming instead that it is a genre of literature, just “a kind of writing.”
- I think epistemology and metaphysics are core, and crucial, parts of philosophy (and have devoted much time to them); Rorty claims they are illegitimate, and should simply be abandoned and not replaced.
- I think there is such a thing as objective truth; Rorty boasts that he “hasn't much use” for this concept.
- I think there are objective standards of better and worse evidence, and have spent many years working to articulate them; Rorty claims these are nothing but social convention.

I was always somewhat puzzled why Rorty became so famous for his hopelessly confused ideas. Perhaps it was that he wrote rather better than the usual stilted analytic style; perhaps, that he was well-connected and based in prestigious universities (Princeton, Virginia, Stanford); perhaps that many sympathized with his left-wing political ideas. Or perhaps it was just that becoming famous, not working things out, that he really most wanted. But I don't believe, when the history of that period of philosophy is written, he will be more than a footnote. In any case, he was no pragmatist, only someone who kidnapped the name!

MA: You have written that reality is complex, and our knowledge of it inevitably incomplete. We live in a pluralistic universe, you say. Can you explain further?

SH: My metaphysical theory, Innocent Realism, indeed, says that the world is a pluralistic universe, and very complex; but it says much more. Is summarized in “The World and How We Know It” (2018) like this:

[M]y Innocent Realism begins with the thought that there are many things (laws, kinds, our mental states and processes, etc.) which, though certainly real, aren't existent particulars; and that what “real” means is neither “independent of us,” nor “independent of our minds,” but something more like “independent of what you or I or anyone believes about it.”

There is one real world, Innocent Realism continues; but this one real world is a pluralistic universe, extraordinarily various and multi-faceted and yet, at the same time, unified. “Our” part of the world, the earth we humans inhabit, is just one corner of a vast universe, which may itself be only one of many multi-universes. But in this corner, besides the enormous variety of natural stuff, things, kinds, events, phenomena, laws, etc., there is also the almost unimaginable range of human beliefs, hopes, fears, etc., and a dense mesh of human creations, physical and mental, intellectual and imaginative: physical artifacts; social institutions; intellectual constructions such as

languages, notation systems, concepts, and theories; and imaginative creations such as myths, legends, and folk tales, works of art, plays, poems, works of fiction, and the imagined places, people, and scenarios they introduce.

This is how Innocent Realism connects with philosophy of the law (an important social artifact) and with philosophy of literature (a vital imaginative artifact.)

I continue:

Like the enormous variety of artifacts they have enabled us to create, our thoughts and ideas make this part of the world even more remarkably complex than the rest. And, while everything is anchored in natural reality—in the architecture and functioning of our brains, in the physical material of buildings, books, boats, and so on—this is not to say that it’s all, ultimately, explicable by physics. In the Innocent Realist conception, all the stuff there is in the world is physical, and of course subject to physical laws; nevertheless, there’s much more to understanding the world than even a hypothetical completed physics could give us.

MA: You have also written that the content of our beliefs can’t be explained by physics, but is in part cultural. Does this mean you agree with Rorty that truth is made, not discovered?

SH: Again, absolutely not! That is another serious misunderstanding.

What it is to believe something is to have a bunch of complex dispositions to verbal and non-verbal behavior, which are realized in the physical structure of our brains and nervous systems; but the content of the beliefs depends on the relation of those words in our linguistic community to things, events, etc., in the world. What makes something the belief that tigers are dangerous, for instance, is cultural; but what makes it true is that tigers are dangerous.

It obviously doesn’t follow that, as Rorty claims, truth is made by us, not discovered; indeed, I criticize Rorty on this at some length in *Evidence and Inquiry*, chapter 9. This is not to deny that some truths, e.g., legal truths, really, are made by things people do; but even such truths, once made, can then be discovered.

MA: You have also written about the philosophy of economics. How did this come about?

SH: I corresponded for many years with historian of economics Robert L. Heilbroner, which is where my interest in philosophy of economics began. This was in any case part of the much larger project in philosophy of science advanced in my *Defending Science—Within Reason* (2003): a project prompted by an invitation to speak at a panel on “What Do the Natural Sciences Know, and How do They Know It?” at which I shared a platform with Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg.

MA: What about your interest in philosophy of literature?

SH: I have always read widely in English literature, and eventually realized that many of the novels I most loved were essentially epistemological; that’s where my interest in philosophy of literature began. For example, in “The Ideal of Intellectual Integrity, in Life and

Literature” (2005), I spell out some of the important truths Samuel Butler’s wonderful novel *The Way of All Flesh* can teach us about hypocrisy, self-deception, and sham inquiry.

But of course to say, as I do, that a novel can sometimes convey subtleties about human nature much better than an academic article is not to say, as Rorty does, that philosophy is just a branch of literature, nor that truth is a kind of illusion: far from it! Nor is it to suggest that philosophy is secondary to literature, or vice-versa; I can make no sense of such claims.

MA: Some American philosophers in the tradition of analytic philosophy seem now to be tending towards Pragmatism. What is the reason for this tendency?

SH: I’m not sure why you think this. But I conjecture that perhaps what you have noticed is the surprising popularity of Robert Brandom’s so-called “analytic pragmatism.” However, this is in effect mainly a development of late-Wittgensteinian ideas in philosophy of language. It appeals to analytic philosophers precisely because it’s NOT real pragmatism, but something much more familiar, more analytic than pragmatist. Probably the formidable opacity of Brandom’s writing also helps, inviting scads of Ph.D. students to debate endlessly what he meant!

But no, I see no trend towards real pragmatism. American professional philosophy is still dominated by the neo-analytics, and interest in the classical pragmatist tradition is still the province only of a small minority. Might there be such a trend in the future? I can’t guess; no one can. But, if there is, I doubt it will be in the near future, at least.

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