

WHAT IS PRAGMATISM?

Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, James Conant, And
Gretchen Helfrich

The following is a transcript of a discussion about the question 'What is Pragmatism?' between Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and James Conant. The discussion was part of a series of discussions on more or less philosophical subjects broadcast on Chicago Public Radio. This discussion is anchored by Gretchen Helfrich. Two listeners (Chris and Edwin) also took part.

*I thank the participants for making the material available for a wider audience. I have deleted some passages in order to fit the space available for this subject (a nearly complete version appears in the next volume of *The Wittgenstein Studies*). I have tried to keep the character of a discussion. However, a transcript can hardly display the fine nuances of spoken words — and there are indeed some such nice nuances. However, the most important points were, of course, kept. How to think about them — that is up to the reader.*

Richard Raatzsch, University of Leipzig, July 2004

Further note from Stephen Law: readers should be aware that this transcript has been edited. Some material — words, phrases, and passages — has been removed. Italicizations are my own.

Helfrich: More than a century ago America made a major contribution to Western Philosophy: Pragmatism. Luminaries of Pragmatism include John Dewey and William James. To the pragmatists, an idea is like a tool developed in response to surrounding conditions, and the worth of an idea is tied to its practical effects. Is this idea about ideas still at work today? What role does pragmatism play in contemporary thought? 'Pragmatism' usually means something like 'practicality', 'doing what works'. But 'pragmatism' also refers to a philosophy which emerged in the 19th century in the United States among

thinkers like William James, Charles Peirce and, most famously, John Dewey. The philosophical notion of pragmatism is perhaps not so different from its everyday meaning. One definition of 'pragmatism' that is abroad holds that the value of an idea derives from its practical consequences. As a school of philosophy, pragmatism is alive and well; its contemporary advocates have further interpreted and developed the ideas that arose more than a century ago. We'll talk today with Hilary Putnam. Here in Chicago we are joined by James Conant who is a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, and Richard Rorty. Richard Rorty, you are sort of the pragmatist in chief these days. What are the fundamental elements of pragmatism?

Rorty: I think the most important element is saying: 'If you can succeed in justifying your belief to all commerce past present and future in an ideally free communicative situation with maximum availability of evidence then you don't have to worry about whether your belief corresponds to reality.' Pragmatism started off as a reaction against what's been called the correspondence theory of truth. That is the idea that beliefs or sentences are true if they correspond to reality. In the old days there was a sceptical problem, namely, suppose we got these terrifically justified beliefs in physics or politics or whatever — how do we know they correspond to reality? Is justification a test of truth? The pragmatists threw out correspondence with reality and said: 'Worry about justification, worry about availability of evidence, worry about freedom of the communicative situation, then you won't have to worry about correspondence.'

Helfrich: Can you elaborate on what you mean by justification?

Rorty: Just answering objections to the belief you hold, dealing with alternative theories, alternative positions and so on. When we say that the scientists now all agree on the Darwinian theory of evolution we mean they find the belief justified in that it has beaten all the other competing theories in the light of the evidence, in the light of everything the scientists know. When we say that representative democracy is the best form

of government we mean that among people who are free to decide this is the form of government they'd like to live under if they possibly can. That kind of thing. To talk about justification is to talk about relations between human beings, is to talk about correspondence to reality, is to talk about the relation of human beings and something non-human. The pragmatists suggest that you forget about the non-human and just assume all your moral and intellectual responsibilities were to other human beings.

Helfrich: Do pragmatists come down on the question of whether there is this non-human thing or they just leave it aside?

Rorty: They think it's pointless to debate the question: 'Does reality have an intrinsic nature?'

Helfrich: Jim Conant, is that how you understand Pragmatism?

Conant: I certainly think that it's well represented by Professor Rorty. That's what many people think Pragmatism is. In so far as I want to be a pragmatist, I don't want to agree with everything he said.

Helfrich: Well, do you want to be a pragmatist?

Conant: I do, and that partly means: 'What did the people who thought they were pragmatists think?' I mean what is it to be faithful to their thought? So what Professor Rorty said in answering your question initially he put the question negatively, he said this is what pragmatists reject. They reject a certain conception of correspondence. And I think most of what he said there I would probably agree with. That is, there are certain theories of correspondence which are pretty hard to spell out and they were rejecting them. But I think the crucial step comes when one says, that is, something positive, that is, not what pragmatists reject but what do they affirm, what are they putting in its place? And there it's tempting to say something like — and I think Professor Rorty does sometimes say things like this — that what for instance meaning or truth is is not just a pragmatist theory of meaning and truth. It isn't just a rejection of a certain theory. But it's a positive theory that says that, for instance, truth is exhausted by justification.

So what it is for something to be true for a pragmatist is for it to pass muster with a certain community of peers to find a certain way. And that does fit in with what he said when he said, for instance, pragmatists aren't interested in anything trans-human or non-human and being responsible to that. And I do worry about such a view. I think that we should be able to make sense of the entire community being wrong. So we can have beliefs that are well justified. Maybe our best scientific theory is well justified. But it could turn out not to be true. The way we use the word 'true' that's a well formed thought. And what we mean isn't just: 'As a community we'll change our mind.' But that there's something we're wrong about, something we're answerable to. Which isn't just what will pass muster with our peers.

Helfrich: I mean that if a new idea comes along and the justification is better than the justification for the original idea then you change your mind.

Conant: Right, but what does 'justification is better' mean? Does it mean we can convince most of our peers? Or is that all it means? Or is it only part of what it means? I think the reason the situation is difficult is if you have good practices of inquiry getting things right that is being answerable to something non-human, the world. And convincing your peers that this is what we should say about the non-human world more or less coincide. But I think if one wants to give an account of what truth is and one simply says: 'It is justification and nothing more' ... at that point I think you've thrown out a notion of truth that I would like to hang on to. And it seems to me that at least some pragmatists sometimes have worried about losing that notion of truth.

Helfrich: Hilary Putnam, anything you would like to add to our working, somewhat internally contradictory, definition of pragmatism?

Putnam: Okay, I don't call myself a pragmatist although I think I've learned an enormous amount from the pragmatists. And the reason I don't call myself a pragmatist is I'm relatively less interested in what the pragmatists have to say about truth. Those are important issues in philosophy. They're fascinating.

But I find the views of the three classical pragmatists on truth all rather confused in various ways. That's not why I go for illumination on the notion of truth. But I find on the question of justification, I think, they have enormous amounts of insight. I think particularly Dewey can be seen as both trying to tell us what was right in classical empiricism — that is, in the empiricist insistence that we turn to experience for knowledge, not try to settle either factual, scientific, religious, moral or political questions by just a priori reasoning or claim that we have some kind of metaphysical or philosophical certainty that everybody should pay attention to and believe. They appreciated the desire of the classical empiricists to bring us back to experience. But Dewey in particular thought that, classical empiricists in fact, in practice, misled us and led us particularly astray in politics and in ethical questions.

Helfrich: How?

Putnam: The great football teams with which modern philosophy begins are called the rationalists and the empiricists and, picture it, one team believes in experience and the other team believes in a priori truths. This is Aristotle's term for philosophic certainty. That's a gross oversimplification because the rationalists [do] think that we need experiment, it's just that they thought you could do a lot a priori. They were wrong about that and I think the empiricists were right. But the empiricists, as Dewey appreciated, really had a very a priori view of what experience is. They thought experiences are just sensations, like the sensation of red or pain or tickle. And one of the things the pragmatists insist is that experience always comes conceptualised. For example we don't just observe sensations, and we don't even just observe tables and chairs. Since science, we observe genes. We observe molecules with electron microscopes. Dewey says science institutes data. Dewey thought that just as the empiricists aren't really describing how science works — they're really inventing a metaphysical story about how it all goes from these observations of isolated atomistic sensations. Similarly when they turn to politics, Mill says: 'Well, we've got to respect the social sciences.' And Dewey says: 'Hooray, we need a lot more and better social sciences.' But

then Mill says the way to improve the social sciences is to develop a perfect science of individual psychology and derive the laws of society from the laws of individual psychology. And again actual attention to social inquiry, actual social problems, got replaced in empiricism by an imaginary science of perfect individual psychology from which you could even deduce the laws of psychology. I mean it's a paradox that Mill and Dewey called their most important books about social inquiry 'logic', which misleads everyone.

Rorty: I have a different take than Hilary Putnam on pragmatism's relation to empiricism. It's true that James and Dewey thought of themselves as continuing the empiricist tradition. I think this was unfortunate sentimentality on their part and that the empiricist tradition is better off forgotten. I think it is a non-profitable question to ask: 'What do we experience?' or: 'What is giving an experience?', or: 'What is the nature of experience?' I think inquiry is a matter of reweaving a network of beliefs and desires. We do this as a result of the causal impacts that our environment makes upon us and we don't need a middleman called experience to describe the process of changing our beliefs and desires.

Conant: There's a connection between the topic about truth — and whether in trying to make our beliefs true we're answerable to something non-human — and the topic that Hilary's just raised, which is how should we think about experience. As became clear in Dick's answer — when he talks about experience he wants to say that experience is something that just involves a certain causal interaction between us and the world. If it was something more than that then our beliefs would be answerable to something other than what other human beings say. I think Hilary is right that the pragmatist thought that what one should think is that experience plays a role in justifying beliefs, our beliefs are answerable to our experience and that Hilary is right that the pragmatists thought that that involves concepts and not just sensations.

Helfrich: If one were a pragmatist, how would one move through the world? What sort of things might one be interested

in? What sorts of things might one handle differently from the way they're normally handled?

Rorty: I think one would move through the world the same way people always have but the rhetoric one would employ to describe one's moving through the world be somewhat different. I think of pragmatism as sort of the second stage of the enlightenment. The enlightenment of the 18th century said: 'You don't have to talk about your relation to God to describe your movement through the world.' But the enlightenment gave rise to what Hilary Putnam has called 'scientism' and to the idea that reason would give us the real facts about the true nature of things, so we didn't need religion to do that, and we didn't need science to do that. Pragmatism I think of as saying: 'No, science isn't privileged anymore than religion is privileged.' All that is privileged is the conversation of mankind and the human imagination which develops new ways of talking, new scientific theories, new political institutions, new customs, new poems. So, if you're a pragmatist, you think of the human community and in particular the human imagination as the forces of moral and intellectual progress instead of what the enlightenment called 'reason' or what before the enlightenment be called 'God'.

Helfrich: Well, how do you decide what progress is?

Rorty: As you go along in the same way that in your individual life you think: 'Well, at least I've learned from that mistake. At least I'm a little more run up now than I used to be.' That kind of thing. You could be wrong. Maybe you didn't learn from the mistake. Maybe your friends think you're actually more immature than you used to be. But all you have to go on is your own sense of your own self-development. And that's all the human race has to go on.

Helfrich: Jim Conant, what would you think applied pragmatism might be like?

Conant: Well, I'd like it to throw out a little less than I think it winds up throwing out in Dick's story. The way I understand pragmatism, the 'pragma'-part — the part that insists on practice and practicality — has to do with an intention to practice.

But that means also attending to the actual role that certain concepts play in our practices.

Helfrich: What do you mean: 'practices'?

Conant: The way we use them. What do we mean when we swear someone in in a courtroom and say: 'Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' What do we mean by 'truth'? Do we need a heavy philosophical theory? I'm inclined to agree with Dick that most of the theories that explain what we mean by 'truth' — we don't need those theories. But I don't think we can make sense of what we mean by 'truth' by saying something like: 'Attend to the consequences of what you say.' That's precisely what we want the person not to do when we swear them in. We want them to attend to what we call 'the truth.' What does that mean? And what I'm worried about in Dick's story is, in his picture of the second enlightenment, where he sort of pictures notions like truth, fact, the world, experience — things like this as being sort of surrogate deities that, just like we've thrown out various theological notions we should, if we attain to full maturity, throw these notions out, too. And all we need is the idea of a conversation between each other. I think that's throwing out a little too much. That's actually *not* attending to the role that these words have in our practices. And that wouldn't just be a change in our rhetoric. If we actually got rid of that vocabulary and tried to live without it that would mean a change in our practices.

Helfrich: Can you give me an example?

Conant: Well, I've argued in print with Dick that I think 1984 was actually Orwell's attempt trying to imagine a world in which he really tried to do without those concepts. What Big Brother wants you to do is to understand: what it is for something to be true is simply agreement among a certain set of peers. And what it is for something to be right about history is for it to accord with all the present records we have about history and that's all it can be. And then, if you have the right control of the record and so forth that looks like a fairly scary world. Now Dick will ...

Helfrich: Now let's be fair here because Richard Rorty was saying earlier that this conversation has to take place under conditions not like those in 1984.

Conant: Dick will immediately say: 'But those aren't ideal conditions.' But then the question is what does 'ideal conditions' mean?, and what is one seeking to do in ideal conditions? What is ideal here? Does ideal mean just that everybody can say what they want, and people can change their mind? Or does it mean that were seeking to be answerable to something other than just a listening consent within the community? I think the right story of what an ideal practice of inquiry is, it's going to have to make sense of the idea that there's something we're trying to get right and not just trying to converge on a consensus.

Putnam: I'd like to bring us down to the actual words of one of the great pragmatists: William James. Late in his life, William James wrote a letter complaining that people misunderstood (and one thought that he is denying) that there is a reality out there, a reality consisting of something other than human beings. And in that beautiful letter he said: Suppose I throw a lot of beans on a table. Depending on my interests I can classify them in a lot of different ways. I say: light beans and heavy beans, big beans in volume and little beans, brownish beans and greyish beans. I could even number them, say, beans whose number is divisible by seven. And as long as my description satisfies *two* conditions, I only say two, namely that it *fits* the beans — and by the way James protested again and again at being understood as denying that there's such a thing as agreement with reality — he says the problem is to analyse the kind of agreement — as long as my description fits the beans, it's answerable to *that* in a way Jim Conant just referred to *and* also fits my interest. What's wrong with calling it true? So, first, I do think that pragmatists have a notion of a non-human reality, have a notion of fitting it. But they're also concerned in the effects our beliefs have in the real world. And it's not a trade off. It's not 'If it makes you happy enough call it true, even if it doesn't fit'. It's got to do both.

Helfrich: So there are not four lights as in 1984 — or five lights?

Putnam: No, that's right, and I would say, coming to what *political* difference they wanted pragmatism to make, well, they had different politics. Peirce was extremely conservative,

James was a liberal and an anti-imperialist and anti-racist. He showed his anti-imperialism by denouncing American imperialism in the Philippines. He supported Dreyfus in the Dreyfus affair. He was worried about a coming world war, very wisely. Dewey was even more radical than James. But what Dewey especially was concerned with — and this fits, I think, maybe with what Dick Rorty means by some of the talk of the very beginning of this hour — was making democracy what he called a 'living faith'. And making democracy a living faith for Dewey connects with his primary life-long mission, which was to reform education. To make democracy a living faith doesn't mean just faith in the idea of voting every few years and the majority deciding. Although given what happened in Florida in the last election, I won't talk about the majority deciding. But democracy, for Dewey, meant teaching people to think for themselves. And they hold their prejudices all through their lives, and Dewey did not want that. Dewey wanted people to think for themselves and he wanted the idea of thinking for yourself about questions under debate to begin in elementary school. He says: 'Teachers too often think people have minds the way a suit has pockets.'

Helfrich: If everyone were a pragmatist, how would that effect democracy? How would it effect the way we make decisions collectively, do you think, Richard Rorty?

Rorty: I don't think there would be an enormous change but it would make us weary of people who say 'logic demands', 'reason demands', 'the facts demand' and so on. As if they were somehow more rational than the rest of us, or more in touch with reality than the rest of us, or something like that. I think that if everyone were a pragmatist, there would be less appeal to great big notions like Reason, Experience, Logic, Facts and so on. And to follow what Jim Conant said, yeah, our practices would change in various ways. But I think they'd change for the better.

Helfrich: Can you give me an example?

Rorty: Walter Lipman, Richard Posner and other people with doubts about participatory democracy have suggested that in the end it's going to have to be a political decision, they're

going to have to be left up to experts, to 'people practiced in the science of politics' — that was Lipman's term. Posner has doubts about what is now called 'deliberative democracy' and in the Sixties was called 'participatory democracy'. I think the prevalence of pragmatism would say: 'Look, experts are just specialists, but it isn't that the experts are in touch with the facts or the experts use method, logic, reason and so on. They just are people who have had more dealings with a certain small portion of what we're talking about than other people.' This isn't a difference that changes anything dramatically, but it changes somewhat the tone in which we talk about the relation of expert opinion to public opinion.

Helfrich: Sometimes appeals to grand themes have yielded very good results — maybe not entirely peacefully, but the example that's often used is the civil-rights movement, you know, which was an appeal to notions of ... Justice and Righteousness and Big Ideas. Would something like that still fit in a pragmatist framework? Jim Conant?

Conant: Well, it all depends on what a pragmatist framework is, of course. But one would certainly want it to, wouldn't one? I mean, it is a feature of the early stages of the civil-rights battle. Depends how far one goes back in its history, I guess. But you had some people who thought something was right and they were going to stand up for it. And some of these people were going to stand up for it whether they were going to win the argument or not. They didn't think that being able to convince their peers and knowing that they would succeed was a condition of taking the position they did.

Rorty: Nobody thinks that.

Conant: Well, the problem is that if you take seriously the idea that all that truth comes to, or being right comes to, is a matter of being able to convince your peers then it does seem that that would be a sound calculation. What I'm concerned about is what the consequences would be of adopting pragmatism as you understand it. What I think is ...

Rorty: I don't understand it as an identification of truth and agreement.

Conant: No, but I thought you do sometimes suggest that

you understand it as identification of truth with justification *in the long run*.

Rorty: No. My view is Davidson's: that the word 'true' is indefinable. You can't identify it with justification in the long run. You can't identify it with anything at all, anymore than you can define the word 'good' you can't define the word 'true'.

Helfrich: So leave it aside and just deal with justification?

Rorty: It's a perfectly good word, just as 'good' and 'right' are. But the Platonic attempt to say 'Hey, we got to have definitions of these terms.' turned out not to work. There are no definitions.

Putnam: I remember the change in your view. In 1990 you and I co-sponsored a conference on truth in Paris in which I remember you saying that you thought there should be a moratorium on the use of the word 'true' for at least ten years.

Rorty: By philosophers.

Helfrich: But not by the rest of us?

Rorty: Other people can use it.

Helfrich: But if the appeal to say 'righteousness' actually brings a lot of people along. Is that legit under pragmatism?

Rorty: I think it would be better to appeal to a better future, to a dream coming true. It's quite true, as Jim says, that the civil movement was backed up by a lot of religious reasons and a lot of reasons like 'it's right', 'it's true', 'it's eternally true', 'it's eternally right' and stuff like that. That's probably harmless enough. In a purely pragmatist culture, I think, they would have just followed up on the idea: 'We have a dream. Now someday the world might be like this, and don't we want to work together to make the world like that?' If you talk about better futures, dream futures, making visions come true I'm not sure you need the stuff about truth and right.

Helfrich: In other words, so Martin Luther King had a dream, why should any of us care about it?

Rorty: Some people cared, some people identified with that dream, other people didn't. They didn't do it by consulting the nature of reality, knowing what was true, knowing what was right. They had different visions of the future of our country. Philosophers would like to think that there are criteria by which

you can settle what the future of the country should be like. I don't think there are criteria anymore than there are criteria for deciding between scientific theories, artistic schools and so on. You look them over, you think about their relative advantages and disadvantages. But there isn't a decision procedure. There isn't an algorithm.

Putnam: Well, it doesn't follow from the fact that there isn't an algorithm that there isn't such a thing as a reasonableness or that there aren't reasonable and unreasonable decisions. Kant in a wonderful passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason* talks about a learned person who can define a concept perfectly and can't recognize an example when it's on the table in front of him. And he says there can't be a rule for reasonableness, for good judgement, because if there were it would take good judgement to interpret the rules. I think the dichotomy, the idea that there isn't an algorithm is, I think, pretty trivial. It doesn't follow that appeal to facts is important. I think especially in issues about racism and the great struggles over racism in the 20th century, first in connection with Jews and Gypsies — Gypsies were also victims of the Holocaust which we tend to forget — in Europe and then... The point I'm making is that — and I should add also the women's movement — that discrimination in both its less violent and more violent forms is always justified by claims to the effect that certain people are inferior in specifiable ways to other people. And the refutation of those factual claims that in fact it's not true that women are not intelligent enough to hold such and such a job, it's not true that they're more emotional as reasonable than men, it's not true that the Jews are this and this and this. It seems to me that it's not simply a matter of talking about making dreams come true. It's also a matter of constantly showing that arguments that are offered to justify discrimination and oppression are bad arguments and rest on false beliefs. Plato says, for example when he justifies equality of women in the *Republic*, that if it's the case — and he thinks it is the case — that the difference between man and woman is that the man engenders and the woman brings forth that that's not relevant to the performance of being a guardian, the highest job in republic and therefore

being a guardian should be open to both men and women. He's exposing a bad argument. I think talk about arguments [having] good or bad premises, being true or false, is essential to responsible politics.

Chris: But as I understood it, the sort of pragmatism, as James and Dewey espoused it, was basically that it's true if it works. Whereas Peirce, who I think coined the term pragmatism to differentiate himself from the other two, said the more it works the more likely it is to be true. I just wanted to be corrected, probably, by the panel.

Rorty: That sounds like an accurate report of what they said. But I don't think the quarrels between Peirce and James or the disagreements between Peirce and James are of any great importance. Peirce was a philosopher who never was able to put together a consistent view. And he was a counter-puncher who, whenever James tried to do him a favour by saying 'I owe it all to Peirce', said 'Oh, James completely misunderstood me' and stuff like that. I don't think that any of the particular formulations that you find in the works of the guys called 'pragmatists' will do. And I agree with Hilary that their attempts to say what truth is should just be abandoned. Nobody should try to say what truth is.

Helfrich: Can you distinguish for my naïve mind the difference between that pragmatic view of truth and something more like relativism?

Rorty: Relativism is what people call pragmatism who don't like it.

Helfrich: Jim Conant, you are one of those people?

Conant: I am, I am. It's true. Let's go back to Martin Luther King for a moment. I think if Martin Luther King took Dick Rorty's advice we would've all been worse off. That is, if he just represented himself as saying: 'I have a dream and I think you'll like it. Try it.' What he did instead was, I think, try to indict people on the ground they presently stand by using concepts like justice and saying: 'If you think hard about what you want to mean by justice right now you have to admit that the society you consent to is unjust.' That means taking people's conceptions of what's right and wrong and making them answerable to

them including, as Hilary was saying, in respect to some issues that come up in racism and discrimination factual issues. It's not just a matter of saying: 'I have a vision. Let's try it. We'll all like it.' If political debate was limited to those resources than I think a lot of people would just say: 'Well, I'd rather not try it.' And Martin Luther King wouldn't have gotten much of a hearing. I think that powerful political change comes about by not just sort of having a dream and encouraging people to dream it, but being able to argue: 'There's something wrong factually, morally or otherwise with what we're doing right now.' And holding people accountable to it and saying the present consensus hasn't gotten something right, not just seeking a different consensus.

Helfrich: Okay, because you said 'indicting people on the ground they stand on' in other words saying: 'Your notion of justice, if you were actually to implement it, would mean that society as we currently understand it is wrong', and so, if we hold you to your own views rather than saying: 'Your views are wrong', 'Your practice is wrong.'

Conant: Your own concepts. But that means you have to look at the applications of the concept. This goes back to Hilary and the beans. What's wrong in 1984 was saying that four fingers are five. What's wrong with describing the beans in certain ways is if you look closely at the beans in what we're doing the concepts don't apply. So what is it to think for yourself? Well, I think what it is to be able to think for yourself is to learn certain concepts and then just not try to guess what other people would say in certain circumstances, but then look at the situations in which the concepts apply and ask yourself: 'What am I committed to say if I want to be using this concept correctly.' And that involves not just looking sideways at your peers and what they'll approve of, but looking at the situations, the world in which the concepts apply in, asking yourself if you got it right. That's something non-human that you have to get right.

Edwin: I want to talk to you guys about rhetoric a little bit in the political sphere. In public meetings we have often lots of little interests that *conflict*. And in any giant public meeting

there are some people who just passionately want to at least come to an agreed set of facts to talk about them. And others who appeal to passion, some very skilfully. Those appeals have great effect on the views the public take from them.

Conant: Well, this is perhaps the moment to say there's much in Dick Rorty's own conception of pragmatism I agree with. I was quibbling over the differences. I do think it's an important feature of democracy that one of the things we have to do is all get along. And part of what 'getting along' means is coming to various sorts of agreements and realizing what it does and does not make sense to litigate right now in the public sphere. You could realize that you're passionately in favour of something, and you can want to campaign for it, but you shouldn't make it a condition of being part of a democracy that everybody believes what you most basically agree with. So this, I think, is connected with why it is that we have things like separation between church and state and why it is that we ask people to put their religious beliefs aside and not make commitment to their religious beliefs a condition of coming to certain kinds of agreement on the public sphere — that would rip the public sphere apart.

Rorty: I could perhaps say something about the questioner's use of the notion of rhetoric. I think of it as part of pragmatism to play down the logic-rhetoric distinction, to play down the distinction between the good arguments and the merely rhetorical arguments. And I would also play down insisting that concepts be used correctly or becoming clear about what one really means by one's concept. I think a concept is just the use of a word. One's use of a word changes all the time under various rhetorical — if you want to call them so — pressures, and so it should. If you take the issue of same-sex marriage, appealing to the concept of marriage is of no use whatever in figuring out whether you're in favour of same-sex marriage. You know the conservatives say: 'Just think about what a marriage is, and of course you'll realize that homosexuals can't get married.' Thinking about what a marriage is or what the concept of *x* is or how the word *x* is correctly used seems to me the kind of thing that philosophers are always asking the public to do.

And it is itself a rhetorical device of rather little value.

Putnam: I think we should distinguish between pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. I think what Rorty is describing as pragmatism is neo-pragmatism of which the great spokesman is Richard Rorty, and he is an authority, I think, on what neo-pragmatism is. James repeatedly denied in hundreds of questions that he was saying that if an idea makes you happy or makes the agent succeed in what the agent is doing then that means it's true. He was furious at that being described as his view and there are hundreds and hundreds of places where he says 'That's not my view'. By the way, the word 'realities' plays a big role in James's prose. Dick, you said in an article once that as far as you are concerned justification is a sociological concept. That is to say whether someone is justified is something we find out by seeing the reaction of S's', that is the speaker's peers to the speaker's statement. Now that seems to me a relativist view, not of truth, but [of] justification. That's text-book relativism about justification.

Rorty: Absolutely, I can't make sense of the notion of absolute justification.

Conant: Maybe I'll just close with a thought about the O. J. Simpson trial. I don't think I would've been happy to have the jurors in that trial — though it wouldn't have made any difference as it turns out — talking to Dick just before their deliberations. It seems to me that we had very good DNA evidence, that O. J. Simpson's blood was all over the place. We had some very good rhetoricians for the defence that confused the hell out of the jurors. And I would've liked the jurors to be able to distinguish between good argument and rhetoric. And sure, it's not a sharp distinction, sure, there's questions like the concept of marriage and what follows from it. But I don't think it follows that the distinction between good argument and rhetoric is one that should just be collapsed in some of the ways that some of what professor Rorty says encourages.

Putnam: Well, I'd like to say a word about the homosexual-marriage issue. Paying attention to concepts doesn't mean that one never sees the need to extend a concept. I think

this is something about our image. Most people know Iris Murdoch as a great novelist. She was also, I think, a great philosopher. And in a little book called *The Sovereignty of Good* she discusses [whether] to be faithful to our moral concepts we have to be prepared to extend them. Socrates, maybe, extended the concept we had of courage when he forced us to distinguish between somebody who is foolhardy and someone who is courageous. He made us realize that just being on to give your life in battle and not feeling the emotion of fear or a flight reaction doesn't mean you're brave. It may mean you're foolhardy. When we came to realize that Ghandi was a courageous man we extended our notion of courage. Similarly we may have to extend our notion of marriage, but that is something that can be discussed.

Rorty: I doubt that the differences between me and Jim and Hilary matter much for politics, for morals or anything else that is of any practical importance. What we disagree about is the relative utility of certain standard philosophical slogans, vocabularies and so on. I think that some of the terms, some of the rhetoric if you like, that Hilary and Jim use can safely be dispensed with. They don't think it can safely be dispensed.