[Book Review of] Robert Cummings Neville: Realism In Religion: A Pragmatist's Perspective

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No Abstract

Schilbrack, Kevin (2011) "[Book Review of] Robert Cummings Neville: Realism in Religion: A Pragmatist's Perspective" *International Journal For Philosophy Of Religion* 70, no. 3: 247-249. [ISSN:0020-7047] [DOI:10.1007/s11153-011-9299-0]
The version of record is available from www.springer.com

Robert Cummings Neville argues that religious terms—such as “God’s grace” or “the Dao”—can refer to some aspect of the extra-human world and not merely to a community’s way of thinking or language, to their narrative or “grammar.” He thus offers a robust defense of realism in philosophy of religion. Moreover, since many religious terms are general terms referring not just to this or that particular reality but rather to the whole of things or the nature of things, he also defends a place for metaphysics in philosophy of religion. Realist metaphysics has been out of fashion for about one hundred years, but after successive currents of antirealist and post-metaphysical philosophy of religion, realism and metaphysics today are both drawing increased interest.

There are two things that are distinctive about Neville’s approach to realist metaphysics. First, his approach is pragmatic in the style of Charles S. Peirce and, as a consequence, Neville sees metaphysical claims about the general character of reality as hypothetical claims, open to disproof. Like the realist metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead (and in dialogue with the Whiteheadian tradition), Neville argues that metaphysical claims are always fallible and corrigible. Neville’s realistmetaphysics is distinctive, second, in that it is global in scope. It is not global in the sense that it aims ultimately to dictate to the rest of the world a certain universal view of reality. It is global, rather, in the sense that Neville holds with Peirce that philosophy needs the largest public possible, precisely to engage and test its claims from as many and diverse perspectives as it can find. These two aspects of Neville’s approach, its fallible character and its global scope, come together in his repeated use of the concept of “vulnerability.” Philosophy is vulnerable since it is perpetually open to disconfirmation and therefore the task of philosophy is to seek out the widest audience it can in order to “go to learn and be corrected” (p. 16).

The book collects essays that Neville has written over the years and it has three parts: “Realism in Truth,” whose essays argue for the place of truth-seeking in theology; “Realism in Pragmatism,”whose essays cover Peirce’s views of signs, a defense of intuition, Alfred North Whitehead, and the place of “nature” in the history of American religious thought; and “Realism in Religion and Metaphysics,” which applies Neville’s approach to comparative theology, conceptions of God, theories of Creation, and notions of eternity. Chapters 6–7 are the ones central to Neville’s statement of a pragmatic metaphysical realism.

From a Peircean view, there are three kinds of sign—icons, symbols, and indexes—each with its own distinctive form of reference. The signs that Peirce calls icons are representations that are supposed to resemble the reality for which they stand. A map should resemble the territory to which it refers; a religious example is a crucifix, an icon of the crucifixion. If iconic signs do resemble their referents, then they are accurate, reliable, and true. The signs that Peirce calls symbols include words and gestures that are meaningful not by resemblance but by convention. To be accurate, reliable, and true, such signs must be coherent. The signs that Peirce calls indexical, by contrast, refer neither by resemblance nor by convention. An index refers, instead, like a symptom, by being caused by that to which it refers. In this way, a high temperature, for instance, can be a sign of a fever. If an index aligns the interpreter with the actual cause of the sign, then it is accurate, reliable, and true. Religious communities often claim that in living the teachings they follow, their practitioners become attuned to a spiritual reality. Neville proposes that by recognizing indexical signs as a kind of reference, philosophers can make sense of the claims that by living a religious life one realizes religious truth.

The lived aspect of religion has often been either ignored by philosophers of religion, or interpreted in the existentialist language of commitment, meaning making, or a leap of faith that implicitly or explicitly treats religion as noncognitive or irrational. But Neville’s Peircean approach treats religious practices as forms of interpretation of or engagement with the world, and therefore as involving this indexical kind of reference. Although this approach certainly does not assume that religious practices are rightly oriented to that which they refer, it also does not assume that religious practices are noncognitive. Thus, in the same away that *being healthy* can be and is often taken as an (indexical) sign that some person’s eating practices are effective, being calm, for example, can be a sign that one’s spiritual practices are effective. Moreover, if a person believes that their diet causes their good health because, say, it is low in carbohydrates but high in proteins, then their physical health gives us reason to think that their beliefs about human physical needs are correct. Similarly, if a person believes that their spiritual practices lead to equanimity because of certain teachings about attachment to worldly goods, then their spiritual health gives us reason to think that their beliefs about the spiritual needs are correct. This proposal raises new questions for philosophy of religion and especially for comparative philosophy of religion. Here are two implications.

If we grant to Neville that it makes sense to speak of religious practices being true or false in this indexical sense, as I think we should, then one can speak of religious practices being lived truly or falsely—not merely in the sense that a religious group was or was not sincere, but rather in the sense that their practices were or were not truly in accord with the realities that they thought they were. What would it mean to evaluate practices indexically? One would have to evaluate the religious practices by

their spiritual fruits. Here, Neville has not yet developed very incisive criteria. Like John Hick, he suggests of the different religious paths that “perhaps we should say, that to the extent that they all give rise to sages and saints, they can all be true in their own ways, with regard to indexical reference” (p. 105). But one should challenge the view that different religions aim at the same fruits: Zen equanimity is not the same as Shi’ite passion, and the fruits of monastic asceticism are not the same as those of the pursuit of social justice. The pragmatist approach is therefore open to (and may in fact require) great attention to the particularities of different religious paths. Nevertheless, evaluating spiritual fruits will require philosophers of religion to have a criterion of what constitutes spiritual health. An analogy here might be to eating practices. Just as different eating practices, as diverse as they are, can be evaluated by the kind of health they produce, evaluating religions indexically lets us reflect on the practices with all the care and insight that we would have for thinking the relation of eating and strong hearts, bones, and the rest of the body. Thus if philosophers of religion are going to evaluate religious practices by their spiritual fruits, then they cannot do so with any profession of neutrality but only in the light of some understanding of what real spiritual health looks like.

The second implication of Neville’s approach raises an issue largely ignored by philosophy of religion. Philosophers often see their task as critically reflecting on religious truth claims, testing whether such claims are coherent and so on. But to see religious lives or disciplines as making indexical reference shifts the focus to how a religious person is changed by their practices. And this focus on practice raises the possibility that evaluating indexical truth may require that the evaluating philosopher of religion herself change. Neville sees this clearly: “perhaps the question of truth requires that the interpreter be changed indexically so as to be able to pick up on what is relevant and important in the object” (p. 114). Thus, just as the religious believer may come to be properly attuned to the religious object only by changing herself—so to speak, by walking to the window to which their tradition directs them—perhaps the philosopher of religion can assess such practices only by being similarly changed. Just as one can only see what is below the window by walking to the window, those who want to assess the alleged perceptions may themselves need to undergo training. (This point is also developed in a perspicuous way by Thomas P. Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Differences* [Hawaii, 2002].)

This book does not provide a close reading of Peirce, nor engage with interpretations of his pragmatism. But it is a provocative book, written from a Peircean perspective, and it puts the lie to the claim that metaphysical claims and pragmatism do not mix.