Among the many virtues of Richard Bernstein are his openness, generosity, and his quest to build bridges and continuities between philosophers and philosophical traditions that may seem to many irreconcilable. Bernstein most recent effort in this regard is the reconciliation of philosophers that belong to the same historical family of philosophers that he belongs to: Pragmatism. He does this by offering a new narrative of the history of Pragmatism that includes the classical pragmatist, the neo-pragmatists, and even philosophers associated with other traditions.

Bernstein’s inclusive narrative takes place at a time in the United States where there is a growing concern by different generation of scholars that something must be done to bridge the obvious gap that exist between different types of pragmatists in America. In particular, there is tension and a lack of dialogue between those that continue to reconstruct the “traditional experience-centric” view of Classical American Pragmatism (CAP) and the “language-centric pragmatism” of the Neo-Pragmatists (NP). Even though all pragmatists in America are part of a philosophical family it is a dysfunctional one. Bernstein knows this very well and his reconstruction of the history of Pragmatism in the 20th century is the source of hope that at least we will appreciate each other as sharing a history. I share with Bernstein the goal of defending a narrative of Pragmatism that is inclusive, but I do not think he come to terms with the core and most difficult issues that seriously split pragmatists today. In this paper, I outline these issues in the hope that someday a genuine reconciliation or “big tent” Pragmatism will be possible.

2. Richard Bernstein’s Narrative of Pragmatism

There is a noticeable difference between Richard Bernstein’s early and recent essays on Pragmatism. In the early essays, he emphasizes those aspects of the CAP that distinguishes them from NP or linguistic Pragmatism. The recent Bernstein, however, is in a more reconciliatory and inclusive mode, trying to
make the case for a “big tent” Pragmatism that includes such thinkers as Sellars, Putnam, Habermas, Davidson, Rorty, McDowell, Cheryl Misak, Cornel West, Jeffrey Stout, and Brandom. According to Bernstein, the proper narrative about Pragmatism will disclose that we are all part of the same philosophical family, after all. Bernstein concludes: “the best philosophic thinking of our country can be understood as variations on pragmatic themes [introduced by the classical figures]. This is my warrant for calling the twentieth century The Pragmatist Century.”

To make his case, Bernstein first challenges what he considers to be the standard narrative about Pragmatism in the USA. This is the story that Pragmatism was born out of different interpretations of Peirce’s principle or maxim that he presented in his early articles and that was discussed in the Metaphysical club in Boston. At some point “Pragmatism” took hold as a generalized name for a distinctively American philosophical movement. But by the late 1930’s pragmatism, as a vital philosophical movement, began to fade from the American scene. During the 1950’s “a quiet but dramatic revolution was taking place in American philosophy departments.” The “British-linguistic invasion” or “the linguistic turn” “reshaped most of the prestigious philosophy departments in the United States.” After this the philosophies of the CAP were almost completely marginalized. The next chapter in this standard story is a leap from the 1960’s to 1979 when Rorty published Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature; the interest in Pragmatism began to change because of Rorty.

Bernstein argues that this standard story is misleading and superficial because Pragmatism did not come to an end with the arrival of analytic philosophy. “On the contrary, after the linguistic turn, philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, and Davidson were able to refine and advance pragmatic themes that were anticipated by the classical pragmatists. The most original and creative thinking of the best analytic philosophers advances the cause of Pragmatism and helps to bring about the sea change that the classical pragmatists initiated.” To Rorty’s credit, he “was one of the first to see that “there is a more subtle and complex narrative of philosophy in America.” “Increasingly, Rorty came to see the work of Donald Davidson as his primary hero because Rorty reads Davidson as going beyond Quine and Sellars in furthering the cause of Pragmatism.”

Bernstein argues that this counter narrative is more inclusive and makes the philosophy of the classical figures (Peirce, James, and Dewey) much more relevant. “The classical American pragmatists introduced a number of interrelated themes that have been explored and elaborated in novel ways throughout the twentieth century.” What are the “key interrelated themes” or insights that directly or indirectly can be identified with the legacy of Pragmatism? Bernstein endorses Hilary Putnam’s view on this. Some of these key theses are antiskepticism, fallibilism, and the rejection of the fact-value