Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism

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I

The concept of a vocabulary plays a pivotal role in the philosophical world-view—and the vocabulary articulating it—that Rorty has been developing over the past three decades. His use of this trope has its roots in Quine's critique of attempts by Carnap and other logical positivists to divide the explanatory labor addressed to linguistic practice between meanings and beliefs. At issue was the Kantian strategy of sharply distinguishing between the activity of meaning conceptual norms (fixing meanings) and the activity of applying those norms forming and expressing beliefs. The idea was, first, that it is entirely up to us what we could and would mean by our words—here no 'should' gets a grip, beyond the subjective 'should' that reflects our convenience or arbitrary preference. But, second, once we have committed ourselves in this regard by free stipulation of meanings, the world imposes itself on us, constraining what we should believe, what meaningful sentences we should endorse. For in the context of a settled association of meanings with linguistic expressions, how it is with the things the meanings fix it that we are talking about determines which sentences are objectively correct, in the sense of true. Our talk is to be explained by factoring it as the product of our free meaning-creating activity and the world's brute, unshunnable actuality—again following Kant, what we can know a priori because we have made it, and what we can know only a posteriori, because it can only be found.

Quine pointed out that this model overdescribes actual linguistic practice. For we simply do not see sharp differences between changes of meaning and changes of belief of the sort that model predicts. Both on the side of what motivates such changes, and on the side of what follows from them, changes in linguistic practice seem rather to be arrayed along a continuous dimension accordingly as we are more or less sure how to go on, and the norms already in play seem to have a firmer or a looser grip on the case at hand, as we are more or less inclined to say that we are going on in the same way or changing how we do things. We can present this dimension, if we like, at most as having a change-of-belief pole at the less radical end and a change-of-meaning pole at the more radical end. (In much the same way, I want to say, Hegel responded to the Kantian premise of this positivist explanatory structure by insisting that all our discursive activity can be construed both as the application of previously constituted conceptual norms—phenomenal activity—and as the institution of new once—transcendental activity. There is no such thing either as the mere application of a previously determined conceptual content nor as the institution of a wholly novel conceptual content. Every application of a concept develops its content. More on the significance of this thought later.)

If Quine is right, then we should not commit ourselves to a way of talking about our linguistic practices that distinguishes between languages, as structures of meanings, and theories, as structures of beliefs. 'Vocabulary' is Rorty's suggestion for a successor notion to do the work for which the positivists appealed to those concepts. Thus where before taking Quine's point on board we would have had to distinguish change of language or meaning from change of theory or belief, in Rorty's recommended idiom we can just talk about change of vocabulary. Of course, to say this much is not yet to outline a view, it is only to point to a task: the task of articulating and teaching us how to use the idiom of vocabularies, of exploring its utility for organizing our thinking about our cognitive and practical activity as knowers and agents. A great deal of Rorty's philosophical work can usefully be seen as responding to this challenge. Indeed, I think that one of the major reasons underlying the deep affinity Rorty feels with Davidson's thought is that Davidson is the other major philosopher whose work is oriented in large part by this particular Quinean legacy.

II

Rorty originally came to public prominence as a philosopher (and not coincidentally, to Pragmatism as it was becoming the premiere department of its time) in the late 1960s, as the author of the first genuinely new response to the traditional mind-body problem that anyone had seen in a long time: eliminative materialism. Just as Nietzsche had overthrown the classical alternatives of theism and atheism by suggesting that at one time God did exist, but that he had died—indeed that we had killed him by coming to talk and think differently, without thereby ceasing to be us—Rorty transcendened the classical alternatives of materialism and dualism by suggesting that although at one time we did (and still now do) genuinely have minds, we can make sense of changes in our vocabulary that would have the effect of destroying them, so that afterwards we would no longer count as having minds, also without thereby ceasing to be us. The argument, characteristicallly, grew out of a reading of the history of philosophy informed by a reading of contemporary work. Puzzling over the question of why the mind-body problem becomes urgent for modern philosophy in a way that it was not for ancient philosophy, Rorty came to a new way of thinking about one of Descartes' central innovations: his definition of the mind in epistemic terms. Descartes defined the mind in terms of its relation to our knowledge of it; it is what is best known to itself. Indeed, the mental is defined by its perfect epistemic accessibility; it is the realm where error and ignorance are impossible—what is happening in one's own mind is exactly whatever one thinks is going on. Rorty called this defining epistemic feature 'inseparability.'

Adapting some of Sellar's ideas, Rorty construed incorrigibility in normative terms as a structure of authority, as according some representations a distinctive sort of epistemic privilege. And he went on to understand this special sort of normative status in social terms: to treat sincere first-person claims about the contemporaneous contents of consciousness as incorrigible by agreeing to count nothing as overriding them, that
is, as providing decisive evidence against them. So long as we deploy a vocabulary that accords some reports the status of having the right sort of incorrigibility, we are incorrigible and do have minds. If, as Rorty further argued, it is coherent to conceive of circumstances in which we alter our vocabulary to allow sincere first-person reports of mental happenings to be overrided, say by the deliverances of cerebroscopes, then by doing so we are conceiving of circumstances in which we would have come not to have minds in the specifically Cartesian sense. Since this process need not affect our capacity to deploy the vocabulary of psychological states about which no-one these days takes us to be incorrigible — beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on — to envisage the loss of mind in this sense need have no impact on our sense of ourselves as intelligent or rational, that is as sapient. Nor need it affect our capacity to understand ourselves as sentient, as sharing that characteristic sort of responsiveness to ever-present stimuli that we evidently share at least with other mammals — even the Cartesian admirers, while they still withhold the attribution of genuine mentality to such noncognitive creatures, on the ground that they were incapable of knowledge, indeed, of the sort of conceptually articulated judgments of which incorrigible ones form an epistemically limiting case.

This rich and original line of thought is developed in the form of a single sustained argument, each of whose steps involves conceptual moves that are potentially controversial. It has set off significant reverberations in many different quarters, but I do not think we are yet in a position to see to the bottom and assess its significance and success once and for all. One aspect of the argument, which has not been much remarked upon, is, I think, particularly important for understanding the subsequent course of Rorty’s intellectual development. For that argument purports to portray a particular case in which a change of vocabulary — from one that accords incorrigibility to some reports to one that does not — brings it about that the objects of talk about. And the point of the eliminativist alternative is that this change should not be assimilated to more familiar cases in which what there is to talk about remains the same, but with a change in vocabulary we stop talking about some bits of it, and start talking about some other bits. The claim is not just that we could stop talking about our minds. The claim is that our having minds in the first place is a function of speaking a vocabulary that incorporates a certain sort of epistemic authority structure. That structure is optional, and speakers of a different sort of idiom simply would not have minds to talk about. If the idea of eliminative materialism is coherent, then we must reconstitute the possible relations that vocabularies can stand in to what they enable us to talk about. That is just what Rorty sets out to do.

III

The way of thinking about the relations between vocabularies and the world in which they are deployed that has been standard since Descartes takes representation as its master-concept. Beginning with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (PMN) Rorty embarks on an extended investigation of the possibility and advisability of moving beyond that model. The point is not to surrender the idea that vocabularies answer to things that are not vocabularies, but to reconceive that idea in terms other than the representational. Rorty’s development of this line of thought has both a critical and a constructive phase. I think it is useful to see the critique of representational models of vocabularies as centering on a particularly pregnant idea that is implicit already in the work on eliminative materialism: his pragmatism about norms, paradigmatically epistemic ones. By this I mean the thought that any normative matter of epistemic authority or privilege — even the sort of authority exercised on what we say by what we talk about — is ultimately intelligible only in terms of social practices that involve implicitly recognizing or acknowledging such authority. On the constructive side, Rorty began to explore the consequences of replacing the representational model by modeling the use of vocabularies on the use of tools. This idea, common to the classical American pragmatists and Wittgenstein, might be called ‘instrumental pragmatism.’

The first move in the critique of representationalism about the semantic and epistemic functioning of vocabularies concerns the notion of epistemically privileged representations. This takes the form of a brilliant rational reconstruction of what was progressive in American philosophy in the late 1930s and early 1960s, epitomized by the work of Sellars and Quine. Rorty sees those thinkers as spearheading a pragmatist dissolution of exo-Kantian positivism. For he reads them as undermining the foundationalist picture of justificatory regress as halted on the side of premises by the pure contribution of the constraining world in the form of what is given in perception, and as halted on the side of inferences by the pure contribution of the unconstrained mind in the form of its chosen meaning. The point of attributing special sorts of epistemic authority to the perceptual given and to inferencesunderwritten by meaning-analytic connections among concepts must, on the pragmatist line, be to explain features of the use of linguistic expressions — the deploying of a vocabulary — in which such authority is acknowledged in practice. But our linguistic practices turn out not to exhibit the sorts of features that would express such explicit acknowledgment: the perceptually given cannot coherently be understood as cognitively significant apart from its role in an inferentially articulated practice of applying empirical concepts, and inferences supposedly underwritten by connections among meanings alone are no more immune to revision in the face of relevant experience than are those evidently underwritten by general matters of fact.

Although Rorty did not put the point just this way, I take it that it is specifically pragmatism about epistemic norms that structures this diagnosis of the conceptual bankruptcy of epistemological foundationalism. The target is philosophical invocations of representations supposed to be epistemically privileged solely by their relations to certain kinds of things — perceptible facts and meanings — apart from the role those things play in practices of acknowledging them as authoritative. So regarded, the Sellarsian and Quinean critiques belong in a box with the later Wittgenstein’s investigations of the kind of social practical background against which alone items such as sentences, mental images, and consciously framed intentions can be understood as normatively binding on our activity, in the sense of determining what according to them it would be correct to go on to do. The real issue concerns what sort of larger practical context we presuppose when we think of something as (functioning as) a representation. For to treat something as a representation is to treat it as subject to a distinctive sort of normative evaluation as correct or incorrect. One lesson of the rational reconstruction of Sellarsian and Quinean critiques of the notion of intrinsic epistemic authority unconditionally relied upon by foundationalist epistemologists is that the idea that the world by itself, or a mental act by itself, organizes norms determining the correct use of vocabulary is a radical mistake. This lesson is the opening salvo in an assault on the usefulness of the Kantian project of factoring the norms governing our deployments of our vocabularies into those due to the way the world is and those due to the activity of the mind.
The role of this discussion in the larger project of recontextualizing the conceptions of freedom and constraint characteristic of vocabularies was obscured, I think, by its occasioning a series of causally incendiary metaphilosophical speculations about its significance for the shape and future of the discipline of philosophy: that without that Kantian project, philosophy would find itself with nothing to do. This line of thought was always at best tangential to the central philosophical thrust of the argument of PMR — a dispensable peripheral frill one could take or leave according to taste without prejudice to the main point. Distracted by all the metaphilosophical dust and dazzle in the air, however, it was all too easy to dismiss the discussion of privileged representations with the observation that semantic representationalism does not, after all, entail epistemological foundationism, and to console oneself accordingly with the thought that a critique of the latter falls far short of a critique of the former. Indeed it does, but this is the move that opens the argument, not the one with which it closes.

IV

Rorty's master-strategy in the book is to use a Kantian conceptual tool to undermine a (broadly) Kantian representationalist picture. That tool is the distinction between *causal considerations and justificatory considerations*. Kant accused his predecessors of running together causal and conceptual issues, largely through insufficient appreciation of the normative character of the 'order and connection of ideas.' It is one thing, he says to Locke, to exhibit the grounds for our *ideas* or beliefs by saying where they come from, that is, what matter-of-factual processes in fact give rise to them. It is quite another to exhibit grounds for those beliefs by saying what reasons justify them. Rorty appeals to this Kantian distinction to enforce a strict separation between the foreign and domestic affairs of vocabularies. Under the banner 'Only a belief can justify another belief — epistemizing a view he shares with Sellars and Davidson — Rorty insists that inferential or justificatory relations are not only between items within a vocabulary (that is), between different applications of a vocabulary, but also across vocabularies. The relations between applications of a vocabulary and the environment of things that are not applications of a vocabulary must be understood exclusively in nonrepresentative causal terms. The application of any empirical vocabulary is indeed constrained by the world in which it occurs, but that constraint should be understood as a kind of causal constraint, not a kind of normative constraint. In a nutshell, this is how I think Rorty's critique of semantic representationism goes. Normative relations are not representational relations, and are exclusively causal. Representation purports to be a normative relation, supporting assessments of correctness and incorrectness, and a relation between representations within a vocabulary and representations outside of that vocabulary. Therefore, the representational model of the relation of vocabularies to their environment should be rejected.

For these — evidently not readers of such canonical texts as "Nineteenth Century Idealism and Twentieth Century Existentialism" — who are pleased to think of Rorty as a kind of linguistic idealist, burdening him with the worst excesses of some of the literary theorists he has the audacity to write about, it may come as a surprise that his critique of representationalism is founded not on denying or ignoring the causal context in which our talk takes place and to which it ultimately answers, but precisely on a head-on collision and focus upon the significance of that context. What distinguishes his view is rather his claim that the sense in which the talk answers to its environment must be understood *in* causal terms, and his determination to follow out the consequences of that claim wherever they lead. Why should one think that Rorty reads Sellars in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" as enforcing this point? Failure to observe the sharp distinction between inferential, normative relations, on the one hand, and causal ones, on the other, leads to the myth of the given: the idea, most broadly, that some thing, a mere occurrence, or process, could by itself have normative (speculatively, epistemically) significance, bind us, obligate us, or entitle us to do something. This is the idea I have called pragmatism about norms: only in the context of a set of social practices — within a vocabulary — can anything have authority, induce responsibility, or in general have a normative significance for us. More specifically, the key idea is that justification is an inferential affair. What justifies a claim or a belief must be another claim or belief, for only then have the right conceptual shape to serve as premises from which it could be inferred. The world consists of things and their causal relations, and they can only cause and not justify a claim or a belief — cannot make it correct or incorrect.

It might seem that a crucial distinction is being ignored here. It might be acknowledged that a worldly fact could not, by itself anyway, justify a claim or belief, and so make it correct in the sense of justificatory entitlement. But it need not follow that the fact could not make a claim or belief correct in the sense of true. The representational model, after all, does not purport to tell us about justification (at least, not directly); its claim is that the use of our empirical vocabularies stands in normative semantic relations to the world, in that how things are determines the correctness of our claims in the sense of their truth. This is indeed a point at which some misgivings are warranted, but the distinction in question is not simply being overlooked. Rorty strenuously resists the possibility of the radical decoupling of the concept of truth from the practices of justification that is implicitly being put in play at this point. His pragmatism about epistemic norms is not restricted to norms of justification, but extends to the norms involved in truth-entitlement. The question is why we shouldn't think of our claims as standing in normative relations to facts, which make them correct or incorrect in the sense of true or false. Rorty rejects the idea of facts as worldly items that make our claims true or false. Once again, this is not because he ignores or denies the existence of everything other than vocabularies. Precisely not. It is rather a consequence of his anti-idealist commitments to the world of causally interacting things that causally constrains our applications of vocabulary not having a conceptual structure, even the existence of everything other than vocabularies. Precisely not. It is rather a consequence of his anti-idealist commitments to the world of causally interacting things that causally constrains our applications of vocabulary not having a conceptual structure, even the very existence of everything other than vocabularies.

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questioned commitment to the existence of a world of causally intersecting things that existed before there were vocabularies, that was not in any sense constituted by our vocabulary-mongering, and that goes its way (in large part independently of our discourse activity (sometimes regrettably so)). I think one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies. For we should distinguish between two senses of ‘claim’: on the one hand there is the act of claiming, and on the other there is what is claimed. I want to say that facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimed (indeed, of what is claimable), rather than in the sense of true claimings. With this distinction on board, there is nothing wrong with saying that facts make claims true – for they make claimings true. This sense of ‘makes’ should not be puzzling: it is inferential. “John’s remark that [p] is true because [q] is a fact that [r],” just tells us that the first clause follows from the second (assuming that the singular terms in the first has a referent).

There were no true claimings before there were vocabularies, because there were no vocabularies at all. But it does not follow that there were no true claimables. In fact, we can show that we ought not to say that. Here is an argument that turns on the grammatical transformations that “It is true that . . .” takes.

Physics tells us that there were photons before there were humans (I read a lot about them in Stephen Weinberg’s account of the early history of the universe, The First Three Minutes, for instance). So if before time T there were no humans, so no vocabularies, we do not want to deny that

1 There were (at time pre-V) photons.

We can move the tense operator out front, and paraphrase this as:

2 It was the case (at time pre-V) that (there are photons).

By the basic redundancy property of ‘true’, we can preface this with “It is true that . . .”.

3 It is true that [It was the case (at time pre-V) that (there are photons)].

Now we can move the tense operator out to modify the verb in “It is true that . . .”:

4 Was [It is true (at time pre-V) that (there are photons)].

This is the key move. It is justified by the observation that all sentential operators can be treated this way, as a result of deep features of the redundancy of ‘true.’ Thus one can transform “It is true that Not [p],” into “Not [It is true that p],” “It is true that Possibly [p],” into “Possibly [It is true that p],” and “It is true that Will-be [p],” into “Will-be [It is true that p].” But now, given how the tense operators work, it is straightforward to derive:

5 It was true (at time pre-V) that (there are photons).

And again invoking the features that make ‘true’ redundant, we get:

6 It was the case (at time pre-V) that (It is true that (there are photons)).

These uniformities involving the interaction of ‘true’ with other sentential operators tell us we are committed by our use of those expressions to either deny that there were photons before there were people – which is to deny well-entrenched deliverances of physics – or to admit that there were truths about photons before there were people to formulate them. Taking the latter course is entirely compatible with acknowledging that the notion of a fact (true claimable) is only intelligible relative to that of a vocabulary.³

That old semanticsist and modal logician Abraham Lincoln asked “If we agreed to call the tail a ‘leg’, how many legs would horses have?” His answer was: “Four, because you can’t change how many legs horses have by changing the way we use words.” This is surely the right response. One cannot change the nonlinguistic facts, by changing linguistic ones. In the counterfactual situation envisaged, the words “Horses have five legs,” would be true, but only because it would not say that horses have five legs, and so would not conflict with the fact that horses would still have four legs. When we specify a counterfactual situation and go on to reason about it, our suppositions should not be thought of as altering the meaning of the words we use now to talk about it. The right thing to say using our concept of photons is that these things would have been there even if no language users had ever existed to undertake commitments regarding them. For facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimable, not in the sense of claiming. If we had never existed, there would not have been any true claimings, but there would have been facts (truths) going unexpressed, and in our situation, in which there are claimings, we can say a fair bit about what they would have been.

V
are facts) justify beliefs? To ask that question is to ask whether something that is not the application of a vocabulary (a fact and not merely cause) the application of a vocabulary. This Rorty and Davidson deny.

I want to suggest one way in which one might take issue with the claims that only causal relations, and not also normative relations of justification, ought to be admitted to obtain between terms that are not applications of vocabularies and terms that are.3

(a) There are facts, that is, conceptually structured truth-makers,

(b) Applications of vocabulary must answer to those facts in a not strictly causal but also in an inferential-justificatory sense, and

(c) In a central range of favored cases of perceptual experience, the facts are the reasons that entitle perceivers to their empirical beliefs.

I indicated in the previous section how someone who shared Rorty's basic commitments might come to be committed and entitled to (a); (b) is just the denial of the general thesis in question, which distinguishes vocabularies' extramural and intramural relations as causal and normative respectively; (c) then specifies the sense in which justificatory relations are to be discerned in addition to causal ones. I claim that one can maintain all of these consistently with pragmatism about norms (and hence without falling into the myth of the given).

Consider what I am doing when I attribute knowledge to someone. I am first of all attributing a propositionally contentful commitment — a taking-true — to the candidate knower. One cannot be taken to know what one does not take to be true. This corresponds to the belief condition on the classical conception of knowledge as justified true belief (the JTB conception). Second, I am attributing some sort of epistemic entitlement to that commitment. Unwarranted or merely accidentally correct takings-true do not count as knowledge. This corresponds to the justification condition on the classical conception, though I am purposely using the somewhat broader notion of epistemic entitlement so as not to prejudice the issue (concerning between epistemological internalism and externalism) of whether one can be justified in holding a belief without being able to justify the belief). What about the truth condition on knowledge, the demand that the belief correspond to or express a fact? In taking the candidate knower's belief to amount to knowledge, I am taking it to be true. That is, I take it to be an expression of a fact: a true claim (in the sense of what is claimed or claimed). Doing that is not attributing anything to the knower above and beyond the propositionally contentful commitment and epistemic entitlement to it already mentioned. It is doing something else. It is endowing the claim, understanding the commitment myself.

The standard of correctness I apply is just correspondance to (in the sense of expression of) the facts as I take them to be. Of course, I may be wrong, as the putative knower may. But the meaning of the truth condition on knowledge, the sense of 'correct' in which the correctness of a belief is being assessed (by contrast to the sense of correctness assessed by attributions of epistemic entitlement), derives ultimately from this correspondence between commitments attributed to another, and those undertaken oneself.4

Such a story underwrites assessments of normative relations obtaining between applications of vocabulary — claims that are candidate expressions of knowledge — and facts with respect to which they are true or false. But it does not violate the claims of pragmatism about norms. For the how things are is allowed to have normative significance for the correctness of someone's sayings and believing only in the context of someone else's attitude toward how things are, that is, only as filtered through the takings-true of the one assessing the knowledge-claim. The facts are caught up in social practices by being endorsed by the one attributing knowledge.

So there is in this picture no conflict between naked, unconceptualized reality and someone's application of concepts. The sort of semantic correctness involved in truth assessments can be made intelligible as comparisons of one application of vocabulary (by the candidate knower) with another (by the one assessing the candidacy). Surely such an account satisfies the scruples that motivate Rorty's rejection of normative word-world relations, in spite of its invocation of facts and its underwriting of talk of 'making-true' and 'correspondence.'

VI

But it is one thing to produce a sanitized notion of the correctness of claims being settled by the facts where 'correct' is understood in the sense of true. It is altogether more demanding to produce a corresponding notion of correctness of claims as being settled by the facts, where 'correct' is understood in the sense of justified. This is what is at issue in claims (b) and (c) above; it is what Sellars' arguments against the myth of the given in terms of the confusion of non-normative causal with normative inferential-justificatory relations apparently mistake against, and it is what the principle that only a belief can justify a belief directly rules out. In fact, the same strategy applied above to domesticate epistemic correctness as truth can be extended to domesticate epistemic correctness as justification or warrant. We can see the facts as standing in normative relations of justification to our claims as well as in causal relations of triggering them. Indeed, we can see them as standing in the normative relations precisely because and insofar as they stand in the causal relations.

Epistemological externalists claim that it can be appropriate to attribute the sort of epistemic entitlement required to distinguish mere true beliefs from true beliefs that amount to knowledge even in cases where the candidate knower cannot offer reasons justifying her belief. A paradox case is where the belief is in fact, whether the believer knows it or not, the output of a reliable belief-forming mechanism. Thus someone who is being trained to distinguish Toltec from Mayan pots by eye may in fact acquire the reliable differential responsive dispositions required for her noninferential reports of Toltec fragments to count as perceptual knowledge before she realizes that she is reliable. She may at that point be inclined to call something Toltec, without being able to give any reason for that inclination. If she is in fact sufficiently reliable in distinguishing Toltec from Mayan bits, reliableist epistemologist argue that when she is right, she genuinely knows she is looking at a Toltec bit, even though she cannot justify that claim, even by an appeal to her own reliability as a noninferential reporter. After all, beliefs acquired in this way are not merely accidentally true.

This sort of epistemological reliabilism, it seems, is a paradox case of what Rorty is committed to treating as the mistranslating of a causal relation for a justificatory one. For what counts as justifying the reporter's belief (and so qualifying it as knowledge, if it is true) is the merely causal relation of reliable noninferential triggering of response (classification as Toltec) by stimulus (Toltec pots). But if we look at things from the point of view of the one attaining knowledge (as we did before), this appearance vanishes.
For what I am doing in taking the reporter to be reliable, attributing reliable differential responsive dispositions to produce nontransitive reports, is precisely endorsing an inference myself. I am taking it that the inference from 'She is disposed nontransitively' to report that the pottery is Tolesc to 'The pottery is (probably) Tolesc' is a good one. This is an inference from a commitment attributed to the reporter to a commitment undertaken by the attributer. I can treat the report as expressing knowledge even though the reporter cannot offer reasons for it because I can offer reasons for it. Although the cannot invoke her reliability, I can - and if I could not, I could not, even by the reliability externalists' light, attribute knowledge. The causal relation can underwrite a justification just because and insofar as those assessing knowledge claims take it as making good a kind of inference. Non-normative causal relations between worldly facts and someone's claims do not exclude normative epistemic justificatory relations between them, since others can take the causal relations as reasons for belief, endorsing reliability inferences. This story about assessments of epistemic entitlement, like the one about truth assessments, is couched in terms of discursive commitments and entitlements. It shows how the difference in social perspective between assess and assessed can bring relations between the vocabulary and the causal environment in which it is applied within the scope of the vocabulary itself.

I said above that barring the sharp separation of the foreign and domestic relations of vocabularies by distinguishing exclusively causal external relations normative justificatory internal relations, on the principle that only a belief could justify a belief, rules the risk of seeming to ignore the distinction between two sorts of correctness-assessments of beliefs for which the facts might be invoked. To say that a worldly fact could not justify a claim or belief, and so make it correct in the sense of justificatory entitlement is not to say that the fact could not make a claim or belief correct in the sense of true. I pointed out that Rorty would not accept a radical decoupling of justification and truth - to justify a claim is, after all, to give reasons to think it is true. I have now sketched a story about assessments of truth and assessments of reliability (and hence epistemic entitlement) that respects nontransitive reports, that I see as underlying Rorty's scriptures, that does not decouple truth radically from giving and asking for reasons, and that shows how causal relations between applications of vocabulary and the facts to which those applications answer (in both the sense of 'answer' given by assessments of truth and that given by assessments of entitlement or justification) can support conceptually structured inferential relations between facts and claims. This story denies that we must understand the relations between vocabularies and the world we address in exclusively causal terms, restricting normative talk of semantic and epistemic assessment to relations within the vocabulary. At the same time, it accepts a version of the principle that only beliefs can justify (or make true, in the sense of giving inferential grounds for) beliefs. It does so by distinguishing what is believed (or beliefable) from beliefs, and appealing to the distinction of social perspective between attributing commitments and inferences, on the one hand, and entitling commitments and adding, on the other. Together, these moves let us talk about facts, as true believables, in favored cases both justifying beliefs and making them true.

I have been urging, in the spirit of friendly amendment, that the scriptures that lead Rorty properly to insist that semantic and epistemic, as opposed to causal, relations are illegitimate only when thought of as obtaining between relata that all have conceptual shape in the satellite without our having to deny that our claims answer normatively to the facts - both for their truth and for their justification - as well as being causally conditioned by them. The key is to look more closely at the social articulation of our linguistic practices of making and assessing claims, of giving and asking for reasons. However, even if this reconstruction is successful, Rorty may well still think that attempting to tame such dangerous ideas as "truth as correspondence to the facts" and "reliable causal connections providing reasons" is a foolish task to take on: no matter how doleful training may seem to have made them, they are always liable to revert to their wild nature and turn on their supposed master. At any rate, the remainder of this discussion will not presuppose the acceptability of these suggestions.

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A dualism is a distinction drawn in such a way as to make unintelligible the relation between the two sorts of thing one has distinguished. Rorty distinguishes vocabularies, within which various distinctive sorts of normative assessment are in order, from things like photons and butterflies, which interact with each other only causally. Things of this kind do not normatively concern each other's activities; they are not in the business of eliciting and enlisting themselves or each other to do things one way rather than another. A distinction of this sort is recognizably central in the thought of figures otherwise as diverse as Kant, Feyerabend, Wittgenstein, and Sellars. Does Rorty's use of vocabulary concern that great foe of dualisms to a dualism of norm and cause? I don't think so. But pursuing the issue opens up some interesting avenues through his thought.

If we take a step back, we can say that there is the vocabulary of causes, and there is the vocabulary of vocabularies (that is, of implicitly normative discursive practices). What can we say about the relations between them? First of all, they are different vocabularies. It may be that all Rorty needs of the Kantian distinction between the order of causation and the order of justification is this fact: these vocabularies are specified in different vocabularies. It would be a mistake to confuse, confute, or run them together. But they are not just different. For one thing, the vocabulary of causes is a vocabulary. It is something we can discuss in the metavocabulary of vocabularies. We can ask such questions as how the vocabulary of Newtonian causes arose, and how it differs from the vocabulary of Aristotelian causes in the questions it prompts us to ask about ourselves and our actions. Rorty himself often raises such questions, and thereby affirms his practical commitment to historicism. But developing and applying vocabularies is something that we, natural creatures, do. Our doing of it consists in the production of causally conditioned, causally efficacious performances. That is to say that using vocabularies is one among many other things that is describable in the vocabulary of causes. Rorty never loses sight of this fact. In his insistence on reminding us of the causal relations between our applications of vocabulary and the world in which we apply it, he affirms his practical commitment to naturalism. The fact that we can use the vocabulary metavocabulary to discuss the causal vocabulary (its emergence, peculiarities, practical virtues and vices, and so on), and the causal metavocabulary to discuss vocabularies (the role of reliable differential responsive dispositions in empirical vocabularies, the practical capacities they enable, and so on) shows that the distinction between the vocabulary of causes and the vocabulary of vocabularies is not drawn in terms that make relations between them unintelligible. So it is not playing the functional expressive role of a dualism. From the point of view of this question, when we have remarked on the complementary perspectives these
metavocabularies provide on each other, we have said everything there is to say — at any rate, everything we need to say — about the relations between the two.

Rorty's positive suggestion is that we can make sense of normative evaluations of vocabularies on the model of assessing tools as more or less useful in pursuit of certain goals or purposes. One of the cardinal benefits he sees stemming from the adoption of the vocabulary of instrumental pragmatism is the discursive pluralism that it implies, encourages. It makes sense to make normative comparisons of tools once a task is specified. Hammers are better than wrenches for driving nails. But it makes no sense to ask whether hammers or wrenches are better, simply as tools. Assessment of tools is always relative to a purpose; to describe something as a tool is only to say that it has a purpose, not to specify some particular purpose. Similarly, Rorty wants to teach us not to ask whether one vocabulary is better than another simply as a vocabulary. We can say that the causal vocabulary is the better one to apply if one's purpose is to predict which way one billiard ball will move when struck by another, or to get someone to say "Ouch." And we can say that the vocabulary of psychology is probably better if we want instead to discuss the relations between Blake's poetry and Wordsworth's.

One of the main indictments of the metavocabulary of representation is that it tempts us to think that we can make sense of the question "Which vocabulary is better as a representation?" without having to specify a further purpose.1 The principle that a certain type of discursiveness can provide a useful tool with which to do it. By contrast, someone like Galileo, Yeats, or Hegel (a "post-in my wide sense of the term — the sense of "one who makes things new") is typically unable to make clear exactly what he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose.

No nineteenth-century physician could have the goal of determining whether neuritis has mass. No ancient Roman governor, however well-intentioned, could resolve to respect the human rights of the individuals over whom he held sway. No medieval poet could set out to show the damage wrought on an individual life by the rigidity of gender roles inscribed by an archetypal family romance. In fact, pragmatism itself is a prime example. Raymond Williams points out that the words 'problem' and 'solution' had only such vague and specialized uses (in mathematics) at the time that they did not even occur in the King James version of the Bible. (Nor, indeed, does happiness.) Can we post-Deweyans so much as understand the way of being in the world natural to ones whose personal, professional, and political activities are not structured by the seeing of problems and the seeking of solutions to them?

And as purposes vary, so they change. No physician can any longer so much as try to isolate the choleric humor in a feverish patient. No statesman can aim, like Metternich, to re-establish recognition of the divine right of kings. And it would be a rare contemporary poet who could adopt Milton's goal and write so as to justify the ways of God to man.2 A distinctive feature of Rorty's discursive pragmatism is how seriously he takes the historicist point about the role of alterations of vocabulary in altering the purposes accessible to us — both by generating novel ones and by rendering familiar ones obsolete or irrelevant. To think of vocabularies this way is to think of them in terms of the metavocabulary of vocabularies, rather than the metavocabulary of causes. For to do so is to focus on bringing about new descriptions, rather than new effects.

This insight provides another reason to reject the monolithic representationalist answer to the question: What are vocabularies for — that is, what purposes do they serve as vocabularies? For the representationalist response is that vocabularies are tools for representing how things always already in any case are. It entails that vocabularies can

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be partially ordered depending upon whether they do that job better or worse. Such a response is at least intelligible as long as we restrict our attention to the role of vocabularies in pursuing the sort of goals that come into view from the broadly naturalistic perspective. Insofar as the point of vocabularies is conceived as helping us to survive, adapt, reproduce, and secure antecedently specifiable wants and needs, limiting the true vocabulary-independent structure of the environment in which we pursue those ends would evidently be helpful. It is much less clear what the representationalist picture has to offer if we broaden our attention to include the role of vocabularies in changing what we want, and even what we need. From the historicist perspective, insofar as it makes sense to talk about what all vocabularies are for, simply as such, the answer must give prominent place to the observation that they are for engineering new purposes. This function of vocabularies is simply not addressed by representationalist naturalism.

These two sorts of purposes—those that loom largest from the perspective provided by the commitments implicit in the naturalist's preferred vocabulary, and those that loom largest from the perspective provided by the commitments implicit in the historian's preferred vocabulary—fund structurally different sorts of assessments of more and less successful vocabularies, and consequently structurally different notions of conceptual or discursive progress. Assessments of the relative success of various vocabularies at achieving purposes of the first kind are at least in principle available prospectively. Assessments of the relative success of vocabularies at achieving purposes of the second kind are in principle only available retrospectively.

Interests rooted in fundamental features of our embodiment and activities as social creatures transcend more parochial features of our vocabularies. They put even practitioners of discarded vocabularies in a position to assess with some authority the relative success of different attempts at pursuing them. Thus Aristotle would not, without complete re-education, be able to appreciate much of the conceptual progress we have made in physics since his time. But he would immediately be able to appreciate our greater facility at making large explosions, constructing tall buildings, traveling and transporting cargo by air, and so on. For our techniques are simply and evidently better at doing things he could already perfectly well understand wanting to do—in a way that more accurately measuring the charge on an electron is not something he could already understand wanting to do. We owe the preservation of the bulk of classical Greek philosophy and literature—the repository of their vocabularies—to the admittance of the early Arabs for the practical achievements of Greek medicine. Greek doctors could save warriors from the effects of battlefield wounds and diseases the Arabs knew would otherwise be fatal. That gave them a reason to treasure and translate works of Greek theory that would otherwise have left them unused. For the medical practice answered to interests the Arabs shared, while the theory—which the Greeks insisted was inseparable from the practice—answered to interests formulable only in an alien vocabulary. In cases like these, progress in achieving ends can be visible even from the point of view of those speaking a less successful vocabulary.

By contrast, the sophisticated interests that are intelligible only as products of particular vocabularies give rise to assessments of success and progress that are essentially available only retrospectively. From the privileged vantage point of what we take to be a mature atomic theory of the nature of matter, we can retrospectively discern (indeed, in an important sense, constitute) a progressive path trodden by Democritus, Lucretius, Dalton, and Rutherford, and contrast it with the mistakes of the feet of infinitely divisible cosmic goo. Nineteenth-century realist painters, having won their way clear to the purpose of conveying in a picture exactly the visual information available to an observer from a point of view fixed in space and time could then rewrite the history of art Whiggishly, seeing it as structured by such epoch-making events as the discovery of the laws of perspective; medieval painters would not and could not have seen the later productions as doing better what they were trying to do. Assessments of progress in realism of perspective are essentially retrospective.

Assessments of technological and theoretical progress are evaluations of the relative success of different vocabularies at achieving a fixed constellation of goals. Such evaluation requires that the goals be specified in some vocabulary. The structural difference I am pointing to reflects the difference between goals that are specifiable in all the vocabularies being evaluated, and those that are specifiable only in a privileged subset—in the limit, in one of them. Naturalistic pragmatism allows vocabularies to be evaluated only with respect to their utility for accomplishing the first sort of end. Historicism pragmatism allows vocabularies to be evaluated also with respect to their utility for accomplishing the second sort of end. Naturalistic pragmatism courts the dangers of reductionism and philistinism—so though we could safely dismiss Romantic poetry by asking what contribution it has made to the adaptability and long term survivability of human beings. Historicism pragmatism courts the dangers of egotism and empty self-satisfaction. For it is far too easy to tell Whiggish retrospective stories, rationally reconstructing one's tradition as a monotonous approach to the pinnacle of one's current vocabulary. We can all too easily imagine our scientific institutions falling into the hands of theological fanatics who can describe in exorbitant detail just how the revolutionary change from present day science to their loopy theories represent decisive progress along the essential dimension of pleasure in God—a purpose undoubtedly and plausibly no more available from within the impoverished vocabulary of TwenCen natural science than that of measuring the charge of electrons was from within Aristotle's vocabulary.

Once these two sorts of purposes have been distinguished, it is obviously important to ask whether something about an observer from a point of view fixed in space and time could simplify the problem. It is a central and essential feature of Rorty's developing philosophical vocabulary that it strives to keep both the perspective of the naturalist and the perspective of the historian fully in view at all times. The reductive naturalist must be reminded that they are not departing from a theory an absolutely crucial practical capacity that vocabularies give us: the capacity to frame genuinely novel purposes, and so in a real sense to remake ourselves. The untrivial historicalist must be sprung from the dilemma of buzzwords for the one hand, and self-satisfied pericholism, on the other, by the reminder that there are purposes that transcend vocabularies and permit us to make comparative assessments. The theological fanatic should not be permitted to claim theoretical progress over traditional natural science until and unless that progress can be certified technologically as well. The question is: can they on the basis of their theories both keep the machines running and continue to make the sort of progress at securing common practical ends that would have convinced Aristotle of our greater progress, and ought to convince contemporary scientists that their successors had indeed made corresponding progress? Pragmatism ought to be seen as comprising complementary vocabularies generated by the perspectives of naturalism and historicism, of common purposes and novel purposes, rather than in restricting itself to one or the other.
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Rorty sees the distinction between public and private discourse as a special case of the distinction between thought and talk that takes place within a stable, shared vocabulary, on the one hand, and thought and talk that transcends such a vocabulary by creating a new, individualized vocabulary, on the other. Community-conservative acts of forming "we" intentions, and the giving and asking for reasons that such acts are embedded in, are made possible by the shared norms and commitments implicit in our use of a public vocabulary. Poets and revolutionary scientists break out of their inherited vocabularies to create new ones, as yet dreamed of by their fellows. The creation of novel vocabularies is an activity we can all partake in to one degree or another, but we should recognize the incommensurability of the vocabulary in which we publicly enact our concern for the "we" and that in which we privately enact our concern for the "I." Rorty says:

There is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unenforced by argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange...

He recommends that we begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools—as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and croissants. Certain kinds of writers lead us to realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one who needs us as yet lack words to describe. The sense of wonder reminds us of the failures of our initiations and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The onus is on us to speak only the language of the tribe, to see our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that responsibility is not the only responsibility we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language.

The demands of self-creation and human solidarity [are] equally valid, yet forever incomparable.

Here the tool metaphor is brought in to make intelligible the practical compatibility of both undertakings, the shared commitments implicit in deploying the vocabulary of liberal community and adopting the attitudes of ironic detachment and playful creativity expressed in deploying idiosyncratic vocabularies that bring novel possibilities and purposes into view. These two forms of life are equally near and dear to Rorty's heart, and central to his wider vision of our situation as incarnated vocabularies. We can lead these two lives if we keep a strict separation between the vocabularies of public and private life. The vocabulary that construes vocabularies as tools is Rorty's primary tool for construing that split coherently and nonviolently. For if there is no one thing that vocabularies as vocabularies are for—for instance, mirroring nature, representing the things, from which we should read off our responsibilities, really are—then we can simply see tradition-sustaining and tradition-transforming vocabularies as serving different purposes, and hence as not competing.

What more can we say about the relationship between these two discursive aspects of our lives, beyond the observation that they are distinct and do not compete with one another? I think they can be understood as expressions of the two dimensions of
pragmatism noted in the previous section: public discourse corresponding to common purposes, and private discourse to novel purposes. The novel vocabularies forged by artists for private consumption make it possible to frame new purposes and plans that can be appreciated only by those initiated into those vocabularies. The re-creation of the individual they enable makes possible a distinctive sort of assessment of success that is essentially retrospective—since prospectively, in the terms of the vocabulary that has been transformed and transcended, one cannot in general so much as understand the ends toward which one's efforts are now bent. By contrast, the overarching goals that structure and orient the public vocabulary Rorty envisages are common to, or at least intelligible in the terms of, a wide variety of vocabularies. Minimizing cruelty is an aim rooted ultimately in our biological encoding of pain as the mark of harm for creatures like us. A baseline or default abhorrence of the infliction of pain on one of us (though possibly not on one of those others) is accordingly one of the most basic attitudes institutionalizing and sustaining us as. And just as pain is the paradigm of felt harm to an essentially biological creature, so is humiliation the paradigm of felt harm to an essentially social one. Those are just the sort of vocabulary-transparent common purpose highlighted by the pragmatists-as-naturalists.

Can the same be said of the other common civic aims that Rorty, as liberal theorist, insists should be basic to our public discourse? On the face of it, the aspiration to justice, in the sense that those affected by plans for communal action should have a voice in the deliberation that leads to the adoption of those plans, and the aspiration to freedom, in the sense of ensuring to each individual appropriate behavioral and discursive space in which to pursue purely private ends (where that pursuit does not infringe on the corresponding space of others) have a different status. The aims evidently are not shared by inhabitants of all political vocabularies—either historically, or on the contemporary scene. And Rorty is constitutionally suspicious of the heroic efforts of thinkers like Rawls and Habermas (following such models as Locke, Kant, and Hegel) to exhibit commitments to goals like those as always already implied in giving and asking for reasons in a vocabulary at all. For him, the practical efficacy of appeals to this sort of concern is always relative, not only to our embodiment and social nature, but also to our historical circumstance. That we cannot and need not insist that these considerations can be shown to be pressing from the vantage point provided by every possible vocabulary whatsoever is the upshot of the realization of the contingency of the conditions that make even a liberal policy possible. Nonetheless, though perhaps not to the extent of justice and freedom in these minimal senses may not suffice all those to whom we would in our actual circumstances, and with our actual traditions, like to address political claims in a public vocabulary, those goals are evidently intelligible to them. The problems posed by the collision of the aims of justice and freedom with the ruthless public pursuit of private interest by an arbitrarily privileged few, whether in Athens or in Washington, is not that the parties to the dispute cannot understand one another's goals. They understand each other all too well. The problems are rather practical: the wrong side too often wins. Disagreements of this sort do not belie a shared public vocabulary. (Indeed, a striking feature of contemporary political discourse—and not only in the developed, prosperous part of the world—is the extent to which debates are framed in terms of the opposition between justice and freedom in these minimal senses, on the one hand, and the ruthless public pursuit of private interest by an arbitrarily privileged few, on the other. The disputants just disagree about who is who.)

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Lining up the public/private split in this way with the two sorts of purposes pragmatism can appeal to—those that are most salient from the perspective of the naturalist, who starts out employing the metavocabulary of causes, and those that are most salient from the perspective of the historicist, who starts out employing the metavocabulary of vocabularies—suggests a way of using the vocabulary vocabulary to conceptualize the complementary relation between these perspectives. For this way of thinking about them emphasizes the divide between routine purposes and novel ones, and hence between shared, tradition-sustaining norms and idiosyncratic, tradition-transforming performances. And the way in which those two presuppose and involve one another is of the essence of specifically linguistic practices.

For the characteristic feature distinguishing vocabularies from nondiscursive tools is their function in generating novel claims, and hence novel purposes. Forty years ago Chomsky made the epochal observation that novelty is the rule, rather than the exception, in human languages. In fact, almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is new—not not only in the sense that that speaker has never uttered it before, but more surprisingly, also in the sense that no-one has ever uttered it before. A relatively few hackneyed sentences may get a lot of play: “Have a nice day,” “I'm hungry,” “You'll be sorry,” and so on. But it is exceptionally unlikely that an unquoted sentence chosen at random from an essay such as this one will ever have been uttered before. Nor is this preponderance of novelty a feature special to the special vocabularies and complex sentences of professor-speaks. Even the chit-chat we use to organize routine enterprises in our everyday lives consists largely of strings of words that have never before appeared together in just that order. Almost surely, no-one has ever before said exactly “If it rains, we'll have to take both the baseball equipment and the picnic stuff out of the trunk of the car, because it looks…” That is, even where the sentiment is routine, the expression of it is seldom. (How much more unlikely is it that anyone before Sam Johnson had ever described an acquaintance as "obscurely wise and cunningly kind"?) This phenomenon has been repeatedly confirmed empirically, by searches of large corpora of spoken and written sentences. And it is easily deduced almost from first principles by a comparison of the number of sentences of, say, 20 words or fewer, generated by simple grammatical constructions from the very limited 5,000 word vocabulary of Basic English (readers of this essay probably not only passively understand, but actively use an order of magnitude more English words than that), with the number of sentences there has been time for all human beings to utter in the history of the world, even if they all always spoke nothing but English, and did nothing but utter sentences.

Now some of this novelty is conceptually trivial—a matter of there being many ways to convey (what we want to call) essentially the same thought. But a great deal of it is not. As one moves away from the careless impression that this can be perfectly in order in casual conversation, either in the direction of literature (with poems as the textpole defining the dimension 1 mean to be pointing at) or in the direction of a technical discipline such as metalogy (with equations couched in the mathematical language of fundamental physics as the textpole defining that dimension), one finds more and more that to use a different string of words is in any way importantly different. The more specialized the vocabulary, the more likely it is that lexical or syntactic differences carry with them substantial differences in inferential behavior, and hence
conceptual significance. For more often than not, the uttering of novel sentences is the making of novel claims. The difference between ordinary and specialized idioms in this regard is only one of degree: intensified, the phenomenon that is already evident in everyday life becomes more striking in still more specialized disciplinary idioms.

Novel claims have novel inferential consequences, are subject to novel challenges, require novel justifications. The game of giving and asking for reasons largely consists in the enlargement of the possibilities for such novel commitments, and the exploration both of their consequences and of what would be required in order to become entitled to them. We spend most of our time on untried inferential grounds. Although what else a novel claim does is commit one to, what it would be incompatible with, and what would entail one to it must in some sense be controlled by shared norms that unconsciously govern the concepts one deploys in making such a claim, in the sense that the inferential moves are answerable for them, correctness as determining the process. In exploiting the inferential significance of novel claims, we are not simply tracing out paths already determined in advance. For the inferential norms that govern the use of concepts are not handbooks in advance to be complete or coherent with each other. They are at best constraints that aim us in a direction when assessing novel claims. They neither determine the resultant vector of their interaction, nor are they themselves immune from alteration as a result of the collision of competing claims or inferential commitments that have never before been confronted with one another.

Philosophy proper was born when Plato took as an explicit topic of understanding and explanation the Socratic procedure of exploring, querying, and questioning our concepts by eliciting novel claims and producing novel juxtapositions of commitments his interlocutors were already inclined to undertake so as to expose their potentially incompatible consequences. Now that it is possible for us to investigate the compatibility, by our new lights, of our various commitments, and indeed, of the coherence of concepts we deploy. Engaging in these characteristic exercises of Socratic rationality typically changes our dispositional tendency claims and make inferences. Where these changes are bringing in the result is a change in the conceptual norms to which one acknowledges allegiance: a change in vocabulary. Such changes can be partially ordered along a dimension that has something, that looks like change of meaning, at one end down to us on tablets from above; they are not guaranteed in advance to be complete or coherent with each other. They are at best constraints that aim us in a direction when assessing novel claims. They neither determine the resultant vector of their interaction, nor are they themselves immune from alteration as a result of the collision of competing claims or inferential commitments that have never before been confronted with one another.

Dissenter points to the (now happily archaic) expression 'Boche' as a useful paradigm of inappropriate pejoratives: its circumstances of appropriate application are that someone is of German nationality, and circumstances of application include being barbaric or more prone to cruelty than other Europeans. Using the word, applying the concept, commits one to accepting the propriety of the inference from the circumstances to the consequences of application. If, once Socratic exploration of the inferential and more suitably so in more concept has made this implicit inferential commitment explicit, one does not endorse that inference, then one must relinquish the concept and refuse to apply the term at all. This is most like a change of meaning— but notice that it is occasioned by confronting that meaning with substantive beliefs, perhaps about the Germany of Ilch, Goethe, and Kant. Again, I may be committed to the inference from something's tasting sour to its being an acid, and also to the inference from something's being an acid to its turning litmus paper red. If I then run across something that tastes sour and turns litmus paper blue, I have a problem. Whether I do should count as a change of belief about acids or a change in what
as making a move in the language game. But since it also enables one to make and understand an indefinite number of novel claims, formulate an indefinite number of novel concepts, frame an indefinite number of novel purposes, and so on, subjecting oneself to constraints by the norms implicit in a vocabulary at the same time confers unparalleled positive freedom — that is, freedom to do things one could not only not do before, but could not even want to do. As Sellars says: “Clearly human beings could dispense with all discourse, though only at the expense of having nothing to say.”

The point of speaking the common language of the tribe, binding oneself by the shared norms of a public vocabulary, is not limited to the capacity to pursue shared public goals. It consists largely in the private (in the sense of novel and idiosyncratic) uses to which the vocabulary can be put. Not the least of this is the capacity to generate new specialized vocabularies, the way in which private sprouts branch off the public stem. Linking the point of constraining oneself by political norms to the point of constraining oneself by linguistic norms opens up new theoretical possibilities for a response to the traditional challenge of political philosophy — possibilities that come into view only from the perspective of the historicist pragmatist. This model promises a different way of pursuing what it called in Section III above “the larger project of reconceptualizing the constitution of freedom and constraint characteristic of vocabularies.”

I am inclined to extract more specific political claims from this observation by following the model of Kant and Habermas. Doing that is thinking of our moral value — in terms of which the purpose and limitations of political institutions and activities are to be understood — as deriving from our nature as essentially discursive creatures: vocabulary-mongers. What matters about us morally, and so ultimately, politically is not ultimately to be understood in terms of goals available from the inevitably reductive perspective of the naturalist: paradigmatically the avoidance of mammalian pain. It is the capacity each of us discursive creatures has to say things that no-one else has ever said, things furthermore that would never have been said if we did not say them. It is our capacity to transform the vocabularies in which we live and move and have our being, and so to create new ways of being (for creatures like us). Our moral worth is our dignity as potential contributors to the conversation. This is what our political institutions have a duty to recognize, secure, and promote. Seen from this point of view, it is a contingent fact about us that physiological agency is such a distinction from springs that makes the production of beautiful novel utterances. But it is a fact, nonetheless. And for that reason pain, and like it various sorts of social and economic deprivation, have a second-hand, but nonetheless genuine, moral significance. And from that moral significance there derives a determinant political significance.

Pragmatist political theory has a place for the concerns of the naturalist, which appear as minimal necessary conditions of access to the Conversation. Intrinsically they have no more moral significance than does the oxygen in the atmosphere, without which, as a similar matter of contingent fact, we also cannot carry on a discussion. What is distinctive of the contemporary phase of pragmatism that Rorty has ushered in, however, is its historicist appreciation of the significance of the special social practices whose purpose it is to create new purposes: linguistic practices, what Rorty calls “vocabularies.” There is no reason that the vocabulary in which we conduct our public political debates and determine the purposes toward which our political institutions are aimed should not incorporate the assumption to which political and its citizens’ vocabulary-transforming private exercises of their vocabularies. The vocabulary brings into view the possibility that our overarching public purpose should be to ensure that a hundred private flowers blossom, and a hundred novel schools of thought contest.

XI

I have been urging that the public, tradition-sustaining, and the private, tradition-transfoming sorts of practices that Rorty discusses are two aspects of all discursive activity, neither intelligible apart from the other. This is to say that we should not think of the distinction between public speaking of the language of the tribe and cognitive discursive recreation of the individual — pursuit of old purposes and invention of new purposes — in terms of the distinction between discourse that takes place within the boundaries of a vocabulary and discourse that crosses those boundaries and enters a new vocabulary. For that way of putting things owes its force to nostalgia for the distinction between deliberating about what we ought to believe, within a set of rules fixed by what we mean, on the one hand, and creating a new set of meanings, on the other. And that is the very picture the vocabulary vocabulary was introduced to overcome. Every use of a vocabulary, every application of a concept in making a claim, is not answerable to norms implicit in communal practice — its public distinction, apart from which it cannot mean anything (though it can cause something) — and transforms those norms by its novelty — its private dimension, apart from which it does not formulate a belief, plan, or purpose worth expressing.

To propose this sort of friendly amendment to Rorty’s use of the vocabulary vocabulary is not to deny that it makes sense to talk about different vocabularies: that there is no difference between two conversations being conducted in (and liable to assessment according to the norms implicit in) some one vocabulary, and their being conducted in different vocabularies. Although to treat something as a vocabulary is to treat it as a fit object to be translated (as to adopt the causal vocabulary is to treat it as fit to be in a distinctive way explained), this claim does not entail that any two vocabularies must be intertranslatable. Rorty argues forcefully and to my mind convincingly that any two, as we might call them, fundamental vocabularies — autonomous language games that one could play though one played no other, vocabularies in which one pursues the common interests that come into view from the perspective of the naturalist — must be at least largely intertranslatable. But parasitic vocabularies need not: the vocabulary of Quantum mechanics and the vocabulary Eliot puts in play in “The Waste Land” are not in any recognizable sense intertranslatable. Remarkably made or conventions conducted in these idioms simply come from different discourses. The purposes they subserve, the norms they answer to, are internal to those vocabularies; they are of the sort that come into view only from the perspective of the historian. It may even be a perfect sense to call such vocabularies “incomparable,” if by that we mean just this: they are not intertranslatable, and not evaluable as alternative means to a common end, tools adapted to some one purpose specificable from outside them both.

It does not follow, however, that they are incomensurable in the sense that “there is no way to bring them together at the level of theory,” as Rorty claims in one of the passages quoted above in Section IX. That is, it does not follow that they cannot be articulated in some one meta-vocabulary. I have been arguing that public and private vocabularies are not incomensurable in this sense. To pick two examples not entirely at random: either the causal vocabulary or the vocabulary vocabulary can be used to encompass both sorts of vocabulary. Though one surely does not learn everything about...
them by doing so, one can sensibly discuss the social and economic conditions that
crudely occasioned and conditioned, say, Wordsworth’s poetry or Diderot’s atoms
theory, and the effects those new vocabularies then had on other things. And we need
to see two vocabularies as serving the same purposes in order to see them as serving
some purposes in the way distinctive of vocabularies. Indeed, one of the cardinal
virtues of Rorty’s vocabulary project is precisely that it lets us talk about vocabular-
ies—in both the differences and the intimate relations between their public and
their private aspects—in just such a general way.

This claim raises the issue of just what status what I have called the ‘vocabulary
vocabulary’ has for Rorty. The characterization I have offered of the role it is intended
to play—as an overarching metavocabulary—may well be one he is inclined to resist.
For that way of putting things seems to place this idea in the context of a sort of
metaphysical project that Rorty explicitly and strenuously rejects as a matter of deep
methodological and metaphilosophical principle. I would like to close by attempting to
resolve this contradiction by the traditional ironic Scholastic method of making a
distinction.

Systematic metaphysics is a peculiar literary genre, to be sure. It may be thought of
as distinguished by its imperialistic, even totalitarian, discursive ambition. For the task
it sets itself is to craft by artifice a vocabulary in which everything can be said. This
task can be interpreted in two ways: modestly, or manically. On the former reading,
the project is to limit the boundaries of the sayable. What cannot be formulated in
its preferred vocabulary is to be rejected as nonsensical. Thought of this way,
metaphysics has two characteristics that are seen as objectionable from the point of
view of the more modest reading. First, it aims at scripting a vocabulary adequate to
what can be said in every possible vocabulary. Second, it arrogates to itself a distinctive
sort of privilege: the authority to determine (on the basis of translatability into its
favored terms) what is genuinely sayable, and hence thinkable, and what would be
claims saying and the mere appearance of thought.

Now it is the first lesson of historiist pragmatism that the notion of ‘all possible
vocabularies’ is one to which we can attach no definite meaning. Every new vocabulary
brings with it new purposes for vocabularies to serve. These purposes are not in
general so much as formulative in the unaccidentally available vocabularies. They are the
paradigm of something that Rorty claims (I suggested at the outset, as a lesson drawn
from his eliminative materialism) we should not think of as part of the furniture of the
world patiently awaiting our discovery of them, but as genuinely created by our new
ways of speaking. As such, there is no way to throw our semantic net over them in
advance of developing the languages in which they can be expressed. Further, to be a
pragmatist about norms is to resist that every claim to authority or privilege be
grounded in concrete practices of articulation and acknowledging that authority or
privilege—that no normative status at all is conferred simply by things, not even by the
whole universe, apart from their uptake into and role in some determinate vocabulary.
That principle, rooted in Scott’s critique of the modal logic of identity, is the ground for
Rorty into a view of metaphysics (in the manic sense) as the pursuit of theology by
other means. He has relentlessly pointed out how pervasive are metaphysical claims
that some vocabulary possesses a special sort of cognitive authority stemming from
ontological alone.

On the modest reading of metaphysics, by contrast, the task of this genre of creative
nonfiction writing is still understood as the engineering of a vocabulary in which
everything can be said. But, first of all, the quarrel is understood differently. The

modest metaphysician aims only to codify the admittedly contingent constellation of
vocabularies with which his time (and those that led up to it) happens to present her—
to capture her time in thought. She sees her task as that of constructing a vocabulary
that will be useful for the purposes of the contemporary intellectual: the one who by
default is concerned with seeing the culture whole, trying to make the vocabularies
it now seems useful to employ to get various sorts of practical grips on things hang
as Rorty has pointed out in another connection, one should distinguish the
enterprise of such intellectuals from the enterprise of many various sorts of researchers, who
work within definitive disciplinary matrices, pushing back the frontiers of their particular
portion of the culture, without in general needing to be concerned with how their area
relates to the rest. The special research interest of the metaphysician, I am suggesting,
is to build vocabularies useful for the purposes of intellectuals. The only authority such
vocabularies can claim is derived from the success of the various vocabularies they
address, and the illumination it can provide concerning them. Insofar as there are
vocabularies that are practically successful but not codifiable in a particular metaphysici-


Notes
1 This terminology has since been kidnapped (shades of Peirce’s complaint about James) and
 pressed into service as the label for a distinct position it inspired—one that addresses
 propositional attitudes such as beliefs and desires rather than the occurrent mental events
 that were Rorty’s target. Although the later practitioner of the title is also an interesting
 philosophical position, and although both trace their antecedents in significant ways to Sillars,
 the confusion that inevitably results from the adoption of this terminology is a shame. One
 of its effects, I think, has been to distract attention from the most interesting issues about
 the relations between vocabularies and what they are about that Rorty’s version raises. For
 these issues are raised precisely by the radical suggestion that materialists could choose true
 upon our changing our vocabulary in determinative ways. These issues do not arise for the
 successor notion of eliminative materialism about beliefs and desires. For if that view is
 correct, materialism was always true—what a change in vocabulary gets us is only a change
 from a worse to a better vocabulary, given how things always already were.


3 This is a theme that Putnam has been much concerned to develop, and a deep point of affin-
 ity between these two thinkers—though it would take us too far afield to pursue the

4 Contemporary, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge University Press, 1989—henceforth CJS),
also says things like this in his Deseret lectures on truth.

5 I explain in detail how I think this story goes in Making It Explicit (Harvard University Press, 1994), hereinafter MIE.

6 One of the central tasks McDowell sees himself as the opening chapters of his pathbreaking book, Mind and World, is to take issue with this in a far more radical way than I sketch here. McDowell, like Searle, is an internalist about justification: to be justified one must be able to justify, to offer reasons oneself for one’s beliefs. The view I am outlining attempts to split the difference between this sort of internalism and the sort of justificatory externalism of which epistemological religion is a paradigm. He and I explore some of these issues (as well as what is involved in not decoupling truth and justification) in his “Knowledge and the Internal” and my “Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons,” both in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research (December, 1979). McDowell and I are both concerned, as Roty is, to avoid the myth of the given, and to abide by the larger lesson Sellar’s discussion of it teaches.

7 It does not follow from this claim that “true” just means “whatever I believe.” It evidently does not mean that, or I couldn’t wonder about whether all my beliefs are true. It takes a bit of work to develop the view forward in the text as to avoid commitment to such an unworkable consequence. I show how this can be done in MIE, especially chapters 5 and 8. These discussions culminate in the objection proof (pp. 601–605) which show that the view does not identify the facts with anyone’s commitments or dispositions to apply vocabulary — not with mine, not with all of ours, nor with those of any ideal community.

8 If we were to try to be even a little more careful about pinning this general distinction on Kant, we would have to acknowledge that causation is itself a thoroughly normative (rule-governed) affair for Kant — indeed, explaining the significances of this fact is an absolutely central task of the first Critique. But the distinction between things that act according to rules and things that act according to conceptus or representations of laws, the realms of nature and the realms of freedom, will do pretty well. Roty sometimes (e.g., in “The World Well Lost”) distinguishes these two by saying that what it is for us in practice to rear something so belonging to the first realm, is to see its antica as fit to be explained (which is the cash-value of adopting the causal vocabulary), while to treat something so belonging to the second realm is to see its antica as fit to be rationalized (which is the cash-value of adopting the vocabulary of rationality).

9 Recall Roty’s observation in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton University Press, 1979, pp. 166–17) that near the end of the nineteenth century philosophy was left with two approaches, historicism and transcendism, neither of which gave philosophical understanding any special dispensation. Russell and Husserl, each in his own way, responded to this situation by coming up with something for philosophy to be apologetic about in the Kantian manner. It has taken on the better part of a century to see through their fascinating forms, where we have work our way back to historicism and naturalism.

10 Though that is not to say that causal vocabularies are useless in this case, since we can learn a lot about the vocabularies of these pores by studying the social and political influences to which they were subject, the effects of their early familial experiences, and so on.

11 See for instance, the discussion that culminates at CRY, p. 21.

12 Of course, to say this is not to say that there is no point in coming up with some more limited theoretical notion of representation of things that applies to some vocabularies and not others, specifying a more specific purpose to which some but not all can be turned. But such a notion is not Roty’s target, for it does not aspire to being a meta-vocabulary for talking about all vocabularies, the essence of what being a vocabulary is.

13 Of course, the development of analytic linguistics can also make new uses possible, though it is seldom possible to separate this phenomenon firmly from the discursive context in which it takes place.

14 CRY, pp. 32–33.

15 Notice that this point is independent of, and less radical than, the lesson I suggested at the outset Roty learned from his treatment of the mind in terms of incorruptibility. That case is different from the reconfiguring of men (and soakening of old) purposes, since the properties of the so-opened榴t can be brought into and out of existence by changes in vocabulary. It would accordingly be an even more extreme variety of alteration that could be wrought by changes in vocabulary. In Roty’s view, for us to have minds just is for us to use vocabulary that incorporates a certain structure of authority.

16 I am wary of my hands here at the story Goehr has told in his magisterial Art and Illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation (E.H. Gombrich, Phileston, London, 1960).

17 “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”, in CRY.

18 It should be clear throughout the discussion that Roty’s talk of “private” uses of vocabulary does not fall foul of the considerations advanced in Wiggins’s arguments against the incorruptibility of private languages. Roty’s private vocabularies are private only relatively and de facto, not absolutely, or de jure.

19 CRY, pp. 216–21.

20 Michael Dummett, From’s Philosophy of Language (Harter & Row, 1973) p. 454. See also the related discussion in Chapter Two of MIE.

21 Of course the terms of this question are infinitely contentious. They remain so even when it is not taken to presuppose that this is an issue anyone ever actually faces, but merely a hypothetical whose answer can illuminate the normative status of political institutions. It is not obvious that the validity of political claims depends on their being an answer to any question analogous to this one. It is not clear why it should be norms of rationality that are taken to undergird political norms (though that is the thought of those who adopt the strong version of the Kantian tradition I am discussing). Nor, even supposing this, does it go without saying that the rational norms in question should be assimilated to the model of instrumental or means-end reasoning (though that is an extentism commitment of the pragmatist tradition that Roty shares with Dewey). Again, the idea that the default position is one in which individuals possess maximal freedom of action, their surrendering, relinquishing, or renouncing of which deserves to be classified either as reconstituted or unaccompanied presupposes a very specific Enlightenment picture of the human situation — one that we ought to be wary of root and branch. All these challenges I think we are well taken. Nonetheless, it is repressive to see how the considerations searched above permit a novel response to the queries of the nature of the authority of political norms even in the broad classical form in which not only Hobbes but Kant can be seen to be addressing it.


23 As before (see note 11) we need not think it is so much an illusion to conceive of this as a choice anyone ever actually confronts — no ontological creature would be in a position to weigh the various considerations. But — as was pointed out above in discussing the perspective of the historian — that does not mean that the sorts and benefits of such a ‘decision’ cannot sensibly be assessed retrospectively, from the point of view of someone who can frame the purposes that only become available along one path.


RESPONSE TO ROBERT BRANDON

I shall first respond to what Brandon says in the sections of his paper about which I have doubts — sections IV—VI, in which he tries to rehabilitate the notion of “fact” by...
Notice that we cannot take advantage of the fact that Brandon’s example is an existence-proposition to substitute the following for (P):

(P) The unexpressed true claimable \( X \) exist at \( t \) if and only if \( X \) exist at \( t \).

P is obviously true, but it can play no role in Brandon’s demonstration of the existence of a debatable set of worldly items. Unlike (P) it does not even look like a claim about worldly items. It is obviously just a fancy way of saying, pointless, that it would not have been the case at \( t \) that \( X \) exist if \( X \) had not exist at \( t \).

Prima facie, it would seem difficult to milk a demonstration of the existence of controversial worldly items out of what Brandon calls “deep features of the redundancy of ‘true’” — the features illustrated by his six-step argument about protons. Even after going over it many times, I still do not see that that argument gives him what he needs. The argument seems to me to leave the debate about whether (post-Davidson) to talk about “facts making our claimings true” pretty much where it was.

Heidegger, appreciating the point on which Brandon and I agree — that “the notion of a fact (true claimable) is only intelligible relative to that of a vocabulary” — inferred that before Newton formulated them, Newton’s laws were neither true nor false. I once tried to defend Heidegger’s indicularity, but my defense went over like a lead balloon. So I have resigned myself to muttering, like everybody else, that a true sentence was true before anybody thought it up. But I cannot resign myself to insisting that “facts make claims true — for they make claimings true” (p. 162).

Brandon says uncomplainingly that “This sense of ‘make’ should not be puzzling. It is inferential.” John’s remark that (P) is true because it is a fact that (P) just tells us that the first clause follows from the second.” Well, it is no more or less puzzling that the sense of ‘make’ in “Its dormitive power makes opium put people to sleep.” A true claimable makes a claim true, in the specified inferential sense. A dormitive power makes a substance put people to sleep, in the inferential sense that “Taking it tends to put people to sleep” follows from “It has a dormitive power.”

Why am I so intent on resisting Brandon’s attempt to reconcile the fact that facts are intelligible only relative to vocabularies with his Davidsonian notions like “making-true” and “correspondence”? Because I think that nobody would have had a use for this cluster of notions unless they had a conception of beliefs existing reality as joints which are not relative to vocabularies — which are Nature’s Own, owing nothing to the human needs and interests which led us to dream up phonon-talk and baseball-talk. Without this coming-at-the-joints imagery, nobody would ever have suggested that true beliefs were accurate representations of reality.

I have offered three arguments against this last suggestion. The first argument is that there is no test for whether a belief accurately represents reality except justification of the belief in the terms provided by the relevant community. So Oceanic’s Razor suggests that we slip the representing and just stick to the justifying. The second argument is that the story of biological evolution is helpless to explain the coping-representing distinction, helpless to say when organisms stopped coping and began copying. In the light of these arguments, we should give up thinking of beliefs as representations. We should think of vocabularies as tools for coping rather than media for copying.

But without representations, the notion of “fact” becomes useless, and misleading. It is misleading because it suggests that our better vocabularies cut at the (exists, and
it as making good a kind of inference” (p. 166). But that still seems a long way from saying that “the facts are the reasons.”

Brandom thinks that this gap can be spanned even if we continue to believe “that only beliefs can justify (or make true, in the sense of giving inferential grounds for) beliefs.” For we can distinguish between what is believed (or believeably) from believing) and appeal to the distinction of social perspective between attaining commitments and inferences, on the one hand, and enrolling commitments and inferences, on the other. Together, these moves let us talk about facts, as true believable, in favor cases both justifying beliefs and making them true. (p. 166)

I cannot see, however, why one would want to go from

(A) I use my knowledge of S’s reliability to infer from her report to the truth of her claim.

(B) The fact (the truth of her claim) of her claim justifies her in making the claim.

I should have thought that, until she learnt that others take her to be reliable, she is no more justified in making the claim than the Gruiter answer is justified in buzzing.

Brandom precisely says that Rorty may well still think that attempting to tease such dangerous idioms as “truth in correspondence to the facts” and “relational causal connections providing reasons” is a foolish task to take on; no matter how doleful training may seem to have made them, they are always liable to revert their wild nature and turn on their supposed master. (p. 167)

Something like that is, indeed, my reaction to sections IV-VI of Brandom’s paper. My fear is that coining these dangerous idioms will be taken as a concession by the bad guys: the people who still use perceptual experience as a model for “hard facts,” and who think that phonetic-talking is somehow harder than talk about comparative aesthetic worth.

These bad guys are the people I think of as “authoritarian.” These guys do not agree with Brandom and myself that increased freedom and richness of the conversation is the aim of inquiry, but instead think that there is the further aim of getting reality nice (as opposed to getting, for instance, snow, photons, baseball, Centen and the best use of the term “fact” right).

***************

So much for my reservations about sections IV-VI of Brandom’s paper. I have made no reservations about his “friendly amendment to Rorty’s use of the vocabulary claim” — his claim that “Every use of a vocabulary, every application of a concept in making a claim, look is answerable to norms implicit in communal practice — its public dimension, apart from which it cannot mean anything (though it can cause something) — and transforms these
norms by its novelty—its private dimension, apart from which it does not formulate a
belief, plan, or purpose worth expressing. (p. 179)

Brandom encapsulates this claim in the remark "To use a vocabulary is to change it.
This is what distinguishes vocabularies from other tools" (p. 177).

That way of putting it is a neat way of running part of what Dewey had in mind
when he talked about "the means-end continuum." Dewey's point was that it is no
easier to draw a neat line between what you want and how you will go about getting it
than between the meaning of a word and the beliefs you express with its aid. The more
you learn about what it takes to get what you want, the more you may want something
slightly different; the more we use a word, the more the dictionary is likely to define
that word slightly differently in the next edition.

Examples of both sorts of plasticity are near at hand. I did not quite realize, until I
read Brandom's paper, either that I had adopted a vocabulary vocabulary, or that I was
putting it forward as a replacement for the metavocabulary of representations (p. 168).
But now that I have learned this I find something slightly different by "vocabulary"
than I did before. My philosophical aims have been slightly altered by having been
given a better grip on the tool I have been using to achieve them.

As a result of this alteration, I now think Brandom is right that

we should not think of the distinction between routine speaking of the language of
the tribe and creative discursive recreation of the individual— in terms of the distinction
between discourse that takes place inside the boundaries of a vocabulary and discourse
that crosses those boundaries and enters a new vocabulary. (p. 179)

He is also right to point out how we are in danger of over-romanticizing novelty by suggesting
that great geniuses can just create a new vocabulary ex nihilo. I should be so much
more cautious than this: even the greatest can never do more than invent some variations on old themes, give
the language of the tribe a few new twists. This admission is compatible with saying
we should be profoundly grateful to, for example, Guilele, Yeats, and Hegel.

As a further result, I can now more clearly see why, in the light of hindsight, that I have tried to
discourage people from asking "whether one vocabulary is better than another simply
as a vocabulary" (p. 168). I can tie this in, as Brandom does, with my campaign against
sucessionism (one version of which is what Brandom calls "representationalist
totalitarianism") (p. 170). As he says, successionism leads us to neglect "the role
of vocabularies in changing what we want and even what we need" (p. 170). Brandom
sums up the point of this campaign when he says that "assumptions of progress in
realism of representation are essentially retrospective" (p. 171). (This point ties in with my
claim, in "Response to Habermas," that inquiry should be motivated by fear of
regression rather than by the hope of reaching the ideal.)

I have sometimes tried to sum up my views on these matters by saying that Freedom is
more important than Truth; that it is better to regard inquiry as enlarging our
imagination, and thus our alternatives, than to think of it as getting more and more
things right. It does, as I admit below in "Response to Rorty", get things like snow
and photons and baseball right. But getting things right is not the point of human life
what shooting straight is to the pursuit of happiness. Both are very useful, but they are
only means to an end-changing and. Plato's notion that the point of our
existence is getting things right "more geometrical" was as blinkered as Achilles' conviction
that the point is victory in battle.

Tales of the point of human existence will always be an expression of admiration for
the talker's own gifts, or for his own heroes. My my talk on this topic is an expression of
admiration for Romanticism, and in particular for the form this movement takes in the
best book written by one of my earliest heroes— Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit.
Brandom is equally in awe of that book, and so the two of us agree that the point of
human life is

... to make and understand an indefinite number of novel claims, frame an indefinite number
of novel purposes, and so on, subjecting oneself to constraints by the norms implicit in a
vocabulary [which] at the same time confers unparalleled positive freedom—that is, freedom is
doing things one could not only not do before, but could not even have done" (p. 178).

Brandom is a fellow-historicist and fellow-Romantic as well as a fellow-naturalist, I
agree with him that

what matters about us morally and so ultimately, politically, is not ultimately to be
understood in terms of goals available from the inevitably reductive perspective of the
naturalistic paradigmatically the avoidance of suffering pain. It is the capacity of each of
our discursive creature has to say things that no one else has ever said, things furthermore
that would never have been said if we did not say them. Our moral worth is our
dignity as potential contributors to the Conversation (p. 178).

In such passages as this, Brandom leaves himself open to the same accusations of
pseudo-aesthetician condescension and irony-sealer aestheticism as are frequently levied
at me. He courts them when he sympathizes with my suggestion that "our
overarching public purpose should be to ensure that a hundred private flowers bloom" (pp. 178-9). He courts them again when he goes on to say that "pain, and like it
various sorts of social and economic deprivation, have a second-hand, but nonetheless
genuine, moral significance" (p. 178).

I think that is quite right subjecting oneself to such accusations to insist on this point.
"Representationalist totalitarianism," and attempts to claim "that some vocabularies
possess a special sort of cognitive authority stemming from ontology alone" (p. 180), are
boistered by the idea that pain is our best chance of contact with reality. This
idea, in turn, is supported by saying, correctly, that our most pressing moral duty is to
relieve the social and economic deprivation which fills so many human lives with
unnecessary pain. But I do not think this is quite right. I think the best answer is that we
want everybody to be able to lead a specifically human life: a life in which there is a
chance to compose one's own variations on old themes, to put one's own twist on old
ways, to change a vocabulary by using it. Bruce New World—still the best introduction
to political philosophy—shows us what sort of human future would be produced by a
naturalism untempered by historicist Romance, and by a politics aimed merely at
alleviating material pain.

Notes

1. I published this defense in German, and showed it to Brandom. He counseled me to have it
in the dean obscenity of a learned language.

2. None of these arguments is in original. They can all be found in James or in Dewey.
Epistemology and the Mirror of Nature

MICHAEL WILLIAMS

1. The Emergence of Epistemology

In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Richard Rorty makes the startling claim that epistemology is a modern subject. Of course, it is a commonplace that, in the seventeenth century and thanks largely to Descartes, philosophy takes a pronouncedly epistemological turn. But this is not what Rorty is saying. His view is not that epistemology acquires a new level of importance in the period from Descartes to Kant. Rather, that period is when the subject is invented. Before Descartes, perhaps even before Kant, there is no such subject. Call this the Emergence Thesis.

The Emergence Thesis underscores Rorty’s willingness to contemplate the death of epistemology: for Rorty, tautunmout to the death of philosophy itself. To appreciate the connection, we must recognize that the death of epistemology is not just the end of epistemology. One way to end epistemology would be to solve its problems in some permanently satisfactory way; another would be to convince everyone that its problems, while genuine, are not susceptible of solution. Neither of these ways of ending epistemology answers to what Rorty has in mind. Rorty’s project is an exercise in what I call “theoretical diagnosis”. He wants to bring to light the unacknowledged presuppositions that he believes generate a whole form of inquiry: the problems in which it is addressed and the theories and methods available for their solution. This is different from the kind of “therapeutic diagnosis” that treats philosophical problems — epistemological problems included — as pseudo-problems generated by misuses or misunderstandings of language. Theoretical diagnosis treats the problems as genuine, but only given a definite background of (possibly dispensable) theoretical presuppositions. If these presuppositions can be successfully challenged, then the problems to which they give rise can reasonably be set aside and attempts to solve them on a theoretical level will become obsolete. This has happened to other disciplines in the past: demonology and judicial astrology for example. For Rorty, epistemology deserves a similar fate.

The distinction between rejecting and accepting a problem’s claim to naturalness is not coextensive with that between approaching it diagnostically rather than constructively. This is because, from the standpoint of therapeutic diagnosis, a problem might be rooted in a natural illusion, a persistent temptation to misunderstanding. By contrast, a theoretical diagnostician will suspect the problems that command his attention of having a traceable history, perhaps even a definite point of origin. The availability of