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Is It Pragmatism?
Rorty and the American Tradition

Barry Allen

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.

Emerson

There is no pragmatism, there are only pragmatists, united not by doctrine but by history, culture, and family resemblance. The first generation of American pragmatists—Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey—knew each other as teachers, students, colleagues, and friends. Then came a hiatus, corresponding with the Cold War years of the twentieth century. No one took up Dewey’s mantle as America’s public philosopher. Pragmatism lost intellectual currency, while finding new prestige in the academy, to which it retreated. The academic pragmatism of C. I. Lewis and W. V. Quine conjoined with the logical positivism of emigre thinkers like Alfred Tarski and Rudolf Carnap. By the time Quine was through with it, pragmatism was more technical than practical, and meaningful to none but a few scholars.

Quine’s uninhibitedly technical writings were one current in a stream of internal critique by mostly American sons of logical positivism. No less important was the work of Thomas Kuhn, whose seminal monograph, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), first appeared in Otto Neurath’s positivist *Encyclopedia of Unified Science*. Other important critics include Nelsen Goodman, N. R. Hanson, Mary Hesse, Paul Feyerabend, and Hilary Putnam. By the late 1970s, positivism had never looked so shabby. There was need for an alternative point of view, yet it had to be plausible to people who learned to think with Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein. In 1979, Richard Rorty published his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. That alternative, he said, is a new, revitalized pragmatism.
In that book and later publications, Rorty presents the critique of logical positivism as a triumph of philosophical pragmatism. The result—a synthesis of Dewey and post-war Analytic philosophy—is a pragmatism newly conscious of itself as an alternative on the other side of an exhausted positivist-analytic tradition. Others soon discovered their pragmatism too, including Hilary Putnam, Joseph Margolis, Kai Nielsen, and Richard Bernstein. There was also new attention to the classical pragmatists by Germans like Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. For the first time in 50 years, pragmatism was philosophically interesting again.

Here I discuss Rorty’s pragmatism. I pursue three sorts of questions: 1. How does he come to his pragmatism? 2. How does he modify (or misprision) the American tradition? and 3. Where does the thinking lead philosophically, and how might it be criticized?

**IN THE SHADOW OF POSITIVISM**

Rorty is a critic of epistemology, as well as of the idea that philosophy could be a seriously scientific discipline. That is not necessarily to pronounce “the end of philosophy,” though it does spell the end for a certain lofty conception of the philosopher as master of the best knowledge. We might call that “Philosophy with a capital P.” But this self-conception, which is both Christian and Greek, is not obligatory for any point of view with the right to call itself philosophy. Rorty’s pragmatism aspires to be a post-Philosophy-with-a-capital-P philosophy, philosophy which no longer offers itself as knowledge. This new pragmatism is edifying rather than systematic, hermeneutical rather than analytical, conversational rather than monological and definitive.

In breaking with post-war analytic philosophy, Rorty deliberately turned to the so-called continental thinkers whom the positivists angrily shunned. A European may wonder what this “continental” philosophy is supposed to be. What do Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida have in common that distinguishes them philosophically from Wittgenstein, Carnap, and Dummett? It is not a question worth pursuing. The very idea of a Continental tradition in philosophy was conceived, largely in ignorance, by the logical positivists. Neurath, Carnap, and others invented an imaginary European countertrend to their positivism, imposing a preconceived unity on thinkers they disliked for their style and politics as much as their philosophical ideas.

The term “Continental philosophy,” as used in North America (for instance, in advertising university posts), does not simply mean non-analytic philosophy. Nor does it refer equally to philosophy conceived in continental Europe since, say, Nietzsche. For instance, Jacques Maritain or Ernst Cassirer (or scholars of their work) do not count. To be a continental philosopher, you have to associate with thinkers specifically anathematized by the positivists. That makes Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger the central figures, and readily includes anyone who tries seriously to think with them, such as Derrida, Deleuze, or Derrida.

The positivists were right to sense the threat of thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, who dismiss every major presupposition of the positivist-analytic point of view. That may be why Rorty feels common cause with the excommunicated thinkers. “Both pragmatism and ‘Continental’ philosophy,” he says, “have a common interest in debunking a certain traditional conception of philosophy. This is the conception of a discipline that unites the argumentative rigor made possible by an appeal to commonly shared criteria with the ability to decide issues of ultimate significance for our lives”—that is, Philosophy-with-a-capital-P.

Rorty plausibly sees in Dewey the most lucid development of the ideas of the classical pragmatists. Let me set the stage by discussing some history. James and Dewey shared Peirce’s conviction that the seventeenth century made a great discovery about the methods of knowledge. What is philosophically pregnant in the new science is not a theory, like materialism or mechanism, but the methodological acknowledgment of experiment as a way, a method, even the preferable method, of knowledge. That is the point of view pragmatism celebrates. The incipient pragmatists among modern philosophers are not contemplative empiricists like Locke or Hume, but the experimentalists of knowledge—Galileo, Bacon, Boyle, Hooke, Newton.

Peirce, who worked as a experimentalist most of his adult life, thought it high time to revamp philosophy’s idea of knowledge. Philosophers have been negligent in learning what experimental science teaches about knowing. Supposedly modern thinkers like Descartes and Locke still conceive of knowledge much as Plato and Aristotle did. Knowledge is a clear and distinct idea, present, certain, uncovering or revealing the antecedently real. Locke was no more or less empirical than Aristotle, whose motto—nothing in intellect not first in sensation—might as well be Locke’s. That empiricism, however, has nothing to do with experiments, which are what is really new in the new science. To have an experience you need no more than consciousness. To experiment calls for controlled intervention, contrived observation, deliberate changes to the normal conditions of perception. From the experimental point of view, empiricism is the contemplative fallacy that knowledge begins by just looking. The objects of knowledge are not antecedent beings, but deliberately constructed artifacts, and knowledge is what we test when we test their performance by experiment.

Pragmatists emphasized three qualities of experimental knowledge. First, it requires overt doing, deliberate changing, not contemplative stillness; further, these operations are directed by ideas that are being tested; and the outcome of inquiry—experimental knowledge—is not self-sufficient, not contemplative. The outcome of inquiry is a working mastery of contingent,
external, instrumental relations, by which to anticipate change and govern experience. Philosophy must abandon its old quest for certainty and view knowledge as an endless project of inquiry—a process and instrument—rather than a self-sufficient accomplishment. A scientific concept is a set of operations, not a name for Being. If we ask what is the nature of force? or what is the essence of matter? the experimentalist cannot say. What he can do, and what pragmatism regards as exemplary knowledge, is specify methods for detecting matter and measuring force. Ask a pragmatist what force or matter is and you will be told the operations that test them.

The first pragmatists believed that it would be desirable to generalize this approach to concepts. A more widely pragmatic culture would at the same time be a more thoroughly modern and scientific one. This is what Rorty calls the scientific "let’s bring scientific methods to bear throughout culture" side of pragmatism. More to his liking is the "let’s recognize continuity in science, art, politics, and religion" side. We see both sides in Dewey. There is the scientific project of reconstructing social institutions on the model of experimental inquiry, and there is a view of history as the uplifting tide of progress in what he called the arts of control. As modern people mastered the natural world, they became sufficiently confident, both as a civilization and as individuals, to dispense with belief in God or the need for superstitious reassurances. Rorty situates pragmatism in a wider movement of modern thought that, as he puts it, aims to "wrest power from God—or, more placidly put, dispense with the idea of human answerability to something non-human." A so-called Deweyan or post-Philosophy-with-a-capital-P culture is one that has outgrown every ambition of transcendence.

The expression "ambition of transcendence" comes from Thomas Nagel, who advocates a kind of neo-neoplatonism. Philosophy is the best, the highest, knowledge—or rather, it is the endless ambition to attain such knowledge—"a god’s eye-view"—from which we inevitably fall short. The point of philosophy, Nagel says, is "to reach a position as independent as possible of who we are and where we started," bringing "one’s beliefs, one’s actions, and one’s values more under the influence of an impersonal standpoint." Since we never quite manage that, however, philosophy must find a way "to combine the recognition of our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world with an ambition of transcendence, however limited may be our success in attaining it." Pragmatism is, as it were, born to refute this point of view. Knowledge is not a vision, and science is not in the vision business. Our best knowledge does not reveal a truth that is nature’s own. Modern inquiry is successful precisely because it sets aside the ambition of transcendence. Rorty’s wager is that as knowledge improved when we dispensed with contemplative metaphors of vision and presence, so may the entire culture improve with a frank acknowledgment of the groundless contingency of everything we love and cherish. None of it is essential, natural, eternal, transcendentally assured or grounded. Nietzsche thought that this realization would provoke a crisis of nihilism. He didn’t count on America, where, on the contrary, it confirmed the conviction that the future is an endless frontier for creative action.

Rorty cheerfully admits what an Enlightenment thinker would confidently dismiss—that there is "no ahistorical standpoint from which to endorse the habits of modern democracies." In a way, he is saying what the critics of ideology say, except he is more consistent, and therefore more ironic. Instead of finding all the ideology—all the unreason, emotion, and unconsciousness—on the other side, Rorty allows that his liberal convictions are as groundless and ethnocentric as any political idea. If you share Rorty’s postmodern (neopragmatic) bourgeois liberalism, it is from sentiment or thrownness, not reason or nature, and likewise if fascism or nihilism or Buddhism is more to your liking, Rorty isn’t trying to win converts but to reassure believers.

It is with respect to the expectations for philosophy that Rorty is most at odds with earlier pragmatists. He is closer to the positivist tradition—as-pseudoproblem view, especially as found in Wittgenstein, than to the pragmatists’ tradition-as-scholastic-highjacking view. When William James, in Pragmatism (1907), systematically considers classical questions of metaphysics—substance, materialism, free will, the one and many—his concern is always to cut through a scholastic muddle in order to appreciate the real, practical issue at stake. He seldom fails to find one. He deploys Peirce’s "Pragmatic Rule" (for determining meaning) to prove that the Europeans have lost the authentic subject-matter of philosophy in a decadent scholasticism. Pragmatism will be a New World, a new America in philosophy, a change in the center of gravity, “a kind of new dawn.”

It is this idea of the new, the to-come, that distinguishes American pragmatism from the European critics of metaphysics like Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Take Wittgenstein. In the Tractatus he said that the “correct method in philosophy” would be “to say nothing except what can be said, that is, propositions of natural science—that is, something that has nothing to do with philosophy.” Philosophy ought to be superfluous. That it should exist at all is a scandal, a confusion, possibly a sin. For the later Wittgenstein, "philosophy" remains the name of a problem, but pursued in the right way, it can also be the solution. Somewhat as psychoanalysis teaches a way of hearing what you say that makes you want to talk differently, the later Wittgenstein teaches a way of hearing philosophical arguments that undermines the desire to take them seriously. "Philosophical problems," he said, "should completely disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions that bring itself in question."
Wittgenstein never lost the positivist conviction that “tradition” in philosophy was a deplorable accident unworthy of serious study. Philosophy is something to work through and get over. By rights, it should not exist, and there will be no more of it on the other side of its own best success. And it is this demoralized weariness, tinged with the puritanical antitrade of the positivists—but not American pragmatism—which foreshadows Rorty’s expectations for philosophy. Where earlier pragmatists claimed to have an entirely new approach to knowledge and truth, Rorty wants “to drop the notion of the philosopher as knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well.” He tries to follow a minimalist, consistently deflationary line, debunking traditional preoccupations of philosophy, while avoiding substantial “Philosophical” commitments of his own.

Rorty calls the result a “pragmatism without method.” Someone else might call it pragmatism without pragmatism. Is it pragmatism? Or has Rorty hijacked the name for an importantly different philosophy (as Peirce thought James did)? Perhaps a James or Dewey redivivus would be surprised by some of what Rorty claims in the name of pragmatism. But they might be surprised by other things they didn’t know about either. The point is not to be true to them or their doctrine, but to be true to ourselves and our experience.

THE COURTLY MUSES OF EUROPE

I have emphasized Rorty’s deviations from a consensus among earlier pragmatists. I turn now to a point of agreement, one which also illuminates the difference between pragmatism and Nietzsche’s philosophy. For Rorty, as for all the pragmatists, the ultimate test of truth and knowledge is a popular, public, democratically achieved consensus. A remark from William James suggests the abyss that opens from this point between Nietzsche and the Americans. “The final victorious way of looking at things will be the most completely impressive way to the normal run of minds. . . . It will be by them that all our philosophy shall ultimately be judged.” It is interesting to imagine how Nietzsche might respond to such a remark. But the remark—and more so the sentiment that motivates it—has to be taken seriously. James addresses himself to anybody—anybody who might show up in the public hall where he was lecturing, anybody who might discover the book that came of the lectures, the normal anybody from a modern urban democracy.

For Dewey, pragmatism’s democratic appeal was no less important than its potential role in overseeing the “reconstruction” of a half-heartedly modern America. The cultural penetration of experimentalism and the spirit of modern science has been uneven and fragmentary. Morals, politics, art, and education have been isolated from the results and methods of experimental inquiry. Premodern ways of thinking are still “in full possession of the pop-ular mind.” To change that, to complete the work of a modernity run off the rails in Europe, “defines the specific problem of philosophical reconstruction at the present time.”

Where James is neighborly and democratic, Nietzsche is elective and esoteric, addressing a self-selected readership indifferent or hostile to democratic politics. And where Nietzsche seeks an alternative to modernity—beyond good and evil, beyond left and right, beyond the bourgeois travesties of utilitarianism and democracy—Dewey doesn’t join the anti-modern chorus. Catastrophes like the wars of the twentieth century show, not that modern values are empty, but that their consistent, institutional establishment is more difficult than was once supposed. If modernizing is responsible for important social problems, it is because we are not yet modern enough.

At this point Rorty might feel pulled in two directions. His sentiments belong with the democrats and friends of modern (“liberal”) institutions, but Nietzsche and other critics of the Enlightenment make some good points, and Rorty wants pragmatism to accommodate them. Nietzsche (read perhaps through Heidegger’s eyes) seems to replace a philosophy of substance with a philosophy of will. Rorty’s pragmatism replaces philosophy’s sublime ideas of knowledge and truth with a stripped-down sociolinguistic account, utterly dismissing the old ambition of transcendence. Behind our truth or so-called knowledge is no blind or cunning Will to Power. There is only the banal sociological reality of a linguistic community, its authorities and say-so. Rorty says, the “possibility of correctness and incorrectness”—and this would apply to the rightness of truth or moral action—is strictly a matter of “human beings’ answerability to one another.” There is nothing to be “true to” except those with whom one speaks. To say a belief is knowledge or is true is to pay it a compliment, to single it out as, in your opinion, a belief others should find well worth sharing.

If that’s all there is to knowledge—this banal sociolinguistic agreement—then there is no “truth of beings,” no “way the world is”—no one way, its way. Here Rorty comes close to Nietzsche’s perspectivism. Nor is there a monological rightness of action indifferent to the effects of choices on others. Here Rorty swerves from Nietzsche’s “might makes right” way of thinking, to defend a democratic concern for others that is alien to Nietzsche’s thought. Whereas the relativist supposedly holds that any agreement, any belief, is just as good, equally “true,” Rorty abandons the inconsistent universal perspective implicit in this stand. His alternative is frankly to acknowledge our inescapable ethnocentrism. The ultimate test of rightness is consensus, but not just any consensus. The agreement that defines knowledge is ethnic, ethnocentric, an indexically specified, existential us—our agreement, reached by methods we admire, which have shaped the modern liberal mind and the culture of what Rorty calls the “rich North Atlantic democracies.” To be knowledge is to be known by us, to us, known in ways
we acknowledge. A kind of say-so rules over knowledge. "The hardness of fact," he says, "is simply the hardness of previous agreements within a community about the consequences of a certain event." Apparently anything can be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed."17

Whether in science or morality, all we have to go by, all we have to care for, are the agreements we make to get along, to preserve consensus. The only right that matters, whether in morality or science, is the agreement of conversational peers. To do the right (morality), and to get it right (knowledge), are dialogical, dialectical, rhetorical accomplishments of conversation. Science is a conversation. Politics is a conversation. "Conversation... is the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood."18 This pragmatism thus repeats the traditional gesture of democratizing knowledge, or seems to. Knowledge is subject to none but public, linguistic, conversational conditions; the conditions of the demos, the citizen, anybody who can read, speak, and argue—James's urban democratic normal run of minds.

A philosophy that conceives of knowing as an ethnocentric right to make claims pass for "the truth" is bound to miss the crucial difference between the accomplishment of knowledge and the conventional, social weight of institutional authority. That—authority—is what knowledge ultimately comes to on Rorty's view. While he is a critic of epistemology, he nevertheless shares several of its assumptions about knowledge. For instance, a logocentric, propositional bias: Only a proposition, statement, or claim, solicits the agreement that defines knowledge. To win acclaim, the proposition must be well-justified, defensible (if not actually defended) by good reasons, and that too is a bias of epistemology, making the most important knowledge dialectical, dialogical, discursive, justified by verbal reasons. Rorty's major deviation from epistemology is his so-called antirepresentationalism. This is his argument to the effect that there is no more to a statement's quality as knowledge or truth than the sociolinguistic fact that it is received as such by the ethnocentrically right authority. Knowledge is a statement that wins the right compliments, carries the right prestige, the discourse no one can refute, not because it is so wonderfully true, but because, like the Inquisitors of old, disciplinary gatekeepers interpret persistent disagreement as heresy, and disqualify it, authoritatively, from knowledge.19

In taking this linguistic turn Rorty is, I think, not nearly pragmatic enough. It is from Wilfrid Sellars, who did not regard himself as a pragmatist, that Rorty takes his socio-linguistic idea of knowledge as revolving entirely within what Sellars calls the logical space of reasons. In a passage Rorty cites as authoritative, Sellars argues that when we characterize "an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says."20 On this view, knowledge (or at least the knowledge most worth philosophy's attention) is propositional knowing-that, while the preeminent expression of knowledge is verbal, dialectical, a justified claim to know. It is a short step to Rorty's thought that conversation is the ultimate context for understanding knowledge.

I have no more use than Rorty for optical and contemplative metaphors in the theory of knowledge. But I think that, like Sellars, and like practically all the analytic epistemologists, Rorty loses sight of the technical, artificial, physical accomplishment of knowledge. It is that power which makes the difference between knowledge and belief desirable, valuable, worth cultivating. Why else should a person desire to know, or trouble to seek out knowledge? Rorty says, "Insofar as pragmatists make a distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such [unforced] agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get."21 If that is all there is to it, why should one care about knowledge? Why not renounce the bad taste of agreeing with the many, as Nietzsche and Emerson recommend? Save for the dubious honor of being agreed with, we might as well prefer ignorance or error to knowledge.

I think this paradoxical outcome confirms that Rorty has lost sight of the accomplishment of knowledge. It does not lie in the conversational qualities he emphasizes. The important thing is the quality of the performance that knowledge (as opposed to mere belief) enables, performances which typically mobilize a whole ensemble of artifacts, and are not merely speech acts. The word "knowledge" complements a range of accomplishment as great as material or technical culture, the entire world of human artifacts. The so-called linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy is one more academic overestimation of the sort of knowledge academic methods best master, which is egregiously elevated over every other way in which human beings know how to be effective.

TURNING BACK THE LINGUISTIC TURN

In a reply to some of these points Rorty explains that, in his critique of epistemology, he assumes knowledge is propositional and discursive, not because he agrees with this idea, but solely for the tactical reason that it is the prevalent view among epistemologists, whose conversation he was trying to interrupt.22 The focus on propositional knowledge was "just a way of highlighting the problems which are important to epistemologists, preparatory to explaining how (by getting rid of the notion of representation) these problems can be dissolved." He acknowledges not having been altogether clear about that. "I should have said that sentences, skills, and disciplines (such as historiography) can all be treated as artifacts." The propositional bias was
What are they? What is a belief? There are two main schools of thought. According to the Kantian/cognitive-science school, it is a representation. The American pragmatists say instead that it is a rule and habit of action. It was the Scots philosopher Alexander Bain who defined belief as "that upon which a man is prepared to act." But Peirce, who first put the point in terms of rules or habits of action, said that "from this definition pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary." While Rorty is often hostile to Peirce, here I think they agree. "Antirepresentationalism" may be Rorty’s deepest theoretical affinity with classical pragmatism.

For a pragmatist, beliefs are rules of action, attributed to an agent in the form of habits, inclinations, predispositions, which enter into the causes of intelligent, deliberate action. These are Rorty’s explanatory and descriptive beliefs, and their attribution supposedly has nothing to do with the belief we invidiously distinguish from knowledge. Yet, for reasons brilliantly explored by Donald Davidson, the attribution of explanatory beliefs works under a constraint of rationality and truth. Most of the attributed belief is (has to be) reasonable, plausible, true. It has to hold up, to withstand refutation. It cannot be mere belief, and is indeed (linguistic, propositional) knowledge. Attributed belief, Rorty’s explanatory belief, is therefore constrained by judgments concerning that other, supposedly irrelevant, sort of belief we distinguish from knowledge.

I think Rorty’s point was that we can have the useful explanatory belief without the mere belief that philosophy invidiously contrasts with knowledge. As we see, however, the useful explanations stand or fall with the evaluations that interest me, and they attribute knowledge invidiously distinguished from belief or presumption. Invidiously judging knowledge and explaining people’s action by attributing beliefs are complementary aspects of the same framework of practical social reasoning.

In response to my suggestion that he retains the biases of the epistemology he criticizes, Rorty accepts an enlarged sphere for knowledge, embracing linguistic and non-linguistic tools and artifacts. He explains the point or value of knowledge in terms of reliability and social utility. He adds that those who pursue knowledge may not be personally driven by utility; they may have private, "aesthetic" motives. But the success, the quality of their work, is evaluated by its social utility. That is what makes it knowledge, and not mere belief, pure theory, idle speculation. "What Veblen called ‘the instinct of workmanship’ does indeed produce work with an aesthetic quality that goes beyond fulfillment of easily described needs. Still, we should not call it craftsmanship (but rather, perhaps, ‘fine art’) if that work does not help us improve our estate."27

Rorty goes on to point out that by interpreting knowledge this way, "the distinction between the human and the non-human fades out. For knowledge goes a long way down the great chain of being." Hence his resistance
to my claim that the cultivation of knowledge is one of the major evolutionary distinctions of our species.28 "I do not see why we need to draw any line between the knowing animals and the non-knowing animals... I cannot see anything especially human about knowing how to get things done." Rorty aligns himself with the so-called evolutionary epistemologists: The quality of knowledge is ubiquitous in nature; it is in fact nothing other than the adaptation that Darwin discovered as a (they say the) cause of evolution. So far from distinguishing us, knowing is among the most widespread processes of life. As Rorty puts it, "We attribute knowledge-how wherever telic description seems appropriate."29

Rorty doesn't see anything peculiarly human about knowledge, because he defines its accomplishment in terms that apply to most forms of life, and even to some machines. This is essentially a stipulation, a decision, and one that can as easily go the other way. Rorty doesn't say why he prefers to describe the accomplishment of knowledge in terms that guarantee the inclusion of practically everything alive. Possibly he agrees with Dewey that it is the proper "naturalistic" line, pressed on anyone who takes Darwin seriously.30 But it is nothing of the kind.

All organisms have reliable mechanisms, adaptive habits, telic capacities, "know-how." Any that didn't have long since perished (we probably could not even see them as organisms). Yet there is something different about tools and other artifacts, something different about knowledge, and something different about human beings. Knowledge is learned, but more importantly, it has to be taught, cultivated, cared for, cultured. That already makes it utterly unlike any genetic mechanism, and unlike anything I am aware of in other (modern) species, including chimpanzees.31 I believe that a capacity for the knowledge we invidiously distinguish from belief is unique to modern humans, though we shared something more or less strongly analogous to it with evolutionary predecessors in the Homo genus.

To recognize the knowledge of artifacts as a profound difference between humans and other species is not remotely to challenge any of the important claims of Darwin or evolutionary biology. Human beings are animals, organisms, outcomes of evolution. But one thing about animals is how they are all different. A lion, a cobra, a hawk, a human—all that they share merely insofar as they are animals, and have evolved, is a remote common ancestor. Once all life is seen as connected by common ancestry, the balance of interest shifts to lines of differentiation. Human beings have their differences, their ecological specificity, no less than orchids and orioles. My argument is that this specificity has a lot to do with the way in which the knowledge of artifacts enters into the reproduction of our necessary ecology.

Anyone who acknowledges the kinship (common ancestry) of all life, and who appreciates something of the main geological phases in the evolution of the earth's vast ecology, as well as the infinitely intricate symbiosis that binds all planetary life in an economy we scarcely ken, has taken Darwin as seriously as Darwin would have wished. Our singularity remains. Our specificity remains a singular capacity for superlative artificial performance, which seems to me the substance of what we call knowledge. We modern humans come late in an evolutionary genus built upon that singularity. For the last two million years Homo forebears have cultivated it, amplified it, enhanced it, and we have ultimately come to depend on it as profoundly as we depend on any of our genetically inherited "adaptations." Yet it remains entirely cultural and would vanish in a few generations if neglected.

Rorty says, "I quite agree with Allen that the knowledge of superior artifacts [including, presumably, superior sentences] plays an incomparable role in adapting us to our environment and maintaining that adaptation in the face of ceaseless change." But I cannot see why that fact should lead us to ask the sort of question which Plato became famous for asking—namely, what is knowledge, what is this good? What distinguishes it from phenomena such as opinion, conviction, plausible error? Rorty thinks the question comes too late. There is nothing left to say. "I do not see that there is anything about the value of knowledge and its ecological singularity that we do not already sufficiently understand."32

If everybody understands that so well, why does philosophy continue to ignore the knowledge that matters, in favor of the abstractions of epistemology? One has to admit that "ecological singularity" is scarcely a byword in the theory of knowledge, not even among the so-called evolutionary epistemologists who, on the contrary, firmly deny the singularity of knowledge. And if what I am urging is old hat, why is it so difficult to translate what we presumably know so well about knowledge into effective change in how we treat resources and the environment, how we fund education, manage economies, or administer societies?

Human existence depends now more than ever on the achievements we distinguish as knowledge, because the process of global urbanization, underway since the time of the first cities, is now far advanced, and an urban world, an urban ecology, is without comparison the most demanding and precarious artifact in the history of human knowledge. At the same time, however, and contrary to Rorty's blase reassurances—which are in fact an example of what I am criticizing—we have never cared less for the accomplishment of knowledge, or for the freedom it requires. The nemesis of our civilization looms in that antithesis.

NOTES

ever, his next book, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) makes the connection.


Afterword

Intellectual Historians and Pragmatist Philosophy

Richard Rorty

Having published an amateurish essay in American intellectual history—Achieving Our Country—I find myself, quite properly, rebuked by the professionals. Many of the contributors to this volume are far better read than I in the relevant areas and know much more about the intellectual and social life of the U.S. in the twentieth century. Their footnotes are crowded with the titles of books that I should have read before writing my own book on 20th-century American leftism. Over and over again, in reading their essays, I have winced at my own ignorance of the figures, trends, and events they mention. They are in a much better position to defend Christopher Lasch’s version of what was going on in the American Left during this period than I am to defend Sidney Hook’s.

On the other hand, I think that many of these essays succumb to temptations which are hard for intellectual historians to avoid when they deal with philosophical material. They often reduce philosophical ideas to their good or bad effects on socio-political developments. They give only a very broadbrush treatment to controversies between philosophers, even when those controversies depend on rather delicate distinctions. Historians are excusably chary about getting involved in controversies about, for example, the correspondence theory of truth—or, more generally, about whether the relation of inquiry to nonhuman reality should be understood in representational terms or simply in causal terms. Yet they are sometimes unable to resist taking sides in such controversies, merely on the basis of the presumed socio-political effects of the adoption of one philosophical view or the other. (Witness the temptation felt by many writers on recent German intellectual history to shove aside the parts of Heidegger which have attracted the admiration of his
fellow philosophers in order to zero in on the most Nazi-sounding sentences, and then to claim that the latter fatally contaminate the former.

When intellectual historians discuss American pragmatism, they often pass over a lot of material having to do with metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of mind in favor of material that bears on morals and politics. Thus we find Jeffrey Isaac saying that because pragmatism can be seen as "the philosophical rationale for Progressive reform in America..." the writings of James and Dewey should thus be placed in context of such important contributions to early twentieth-century American political thought" as books by Croly, Lippmann, and Weyl.

It is certainly useful to place their books in that context. But of course James and Dewey would have wanted their books placed, as well, in the context of books by their fellow philosophy professors: E. H. Bradley and Bertrand Russell. Only the latter context brings out what is most distinctive about pragmatism. If James and Dewey had never written a line, American Progressivism could have gotten all it needed in the way of philosophical rationale by picking appropriate passages from either John Stuart Mill or T. H. Green or both. Reformers with scientific and empiricist tastes could have used Mill, and those with metaphysical and Hegelian tastes could have used Green (or his American counterpart, Josiah Royce). These Progressives would never have missed pragmatism.

Philosophy professors, however, would have. James and Dewey brought something new into the anglophone philosophical world—radical doubts about the correspondence theory of truth. Despite James' claim that pragmatism was an offspring of utilitarianism, these doubts might well have annoyed Mill as much as they did Russell. They might have seemed as ludicrous to Green as they did to Bradley and Royce. But when the intellectual history of the twentieth century is written by twenty-third-century historians who try to deal simultaneously with America and with the rest of the West, and with the self-images of scientific disciplines and of artistic movements as well as with those of political communities, I think we shall hear much more about these doubts than we do in most of the essays in this volume (Barry Allen's essay being the obvious exception). Some of these historians will have a story to tell about the longue durée of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thought and will pay relatively little attention to political and social change. This story may, I have suggested, treat Nietzsche and James as having begun a transformation of the human self-image on a scale with (as James only half-jokingly suggested) the Protestant Reformation.

Repudiating the idea that reality has an intrinsic nature to which true statements correspond (be it atoms and void, or Royce's monistic Absolute) in favor of the idea that the beliefs we call "true" are the ones we find most useful still seems shocking to most people. So downplaying this side of James' and Dewey's thought makes them look gooder and greyer than would em-phasizing it. But doing so also weakens their clout. It makes them look like figures who have little importance outside the American context, rather than thinkers destined to play the major roles in universal history which, I predict, they will someday be allotted.

This is not the place to make a case yet again for a pragmatist account of truth and knowledge. Still, it may be useful to note the connection between pragmatism and a feature of twentieth-century philosophy which has already seized the attention of intellectual historians—the shift among philosophy professors, and intellectuals who take philosophy seriously, from talk of experience to talk of language. Anybody who looks at the most discussed philosophers of 1900 and those of 2000 is going to be struck by this shift. Any historian of the twentieth century is going to have to say something about it. The most obvious thing for them to say is that the Nietzsche/James suggestion that the quest for truth is the quest for beliefs that get us what we want gave rise to the thought that the point of language is not to represent either reality or "experience" accurately but, once again, to forge more useful tools.

This line of thought is destructive of James' radical empiricism and of Dewey's animadversions on what experience is really like, not to mention the philosophical initiatives of Bergson and Husserl. But this is not the first time that a philosophical movement has exhibited self-diremption—the subversion of one of its central doctrines by another, equally central, doctrine. The idea that experience is whatever the experiencer reports it as, and that there is no such thing as a language being more or less faithful to the way experience really is, has steadily gathered force among both "analytic" and "Continental" philosophers. Cutting out the intermediary—experience—between the causal impact of the environment and our linguistic response to the environment is an idea whose time has come. To philosophers, the idea of such an intermediary has come to seem a relic of what Quineans refer to as "the seventeenth century's idea idea." Getting rid of that idea—a project common to Wittgenstein and Derrida—is a lot easier if you agree with Dewey and Heidegger that the point of thinking has, in the modern world, become a matter of controlling the nonhuman universe rather than of representing it.

This brings me to an extreme example of the intellectual historians' tendency to take sides in philosophical disputes for political reasons: James Kloppenberg's claim that my "liberal ironism encourages selfishness, cynicism and resignation by undercutting efforts to confront the hard facts of poverty and greed." Kloppenberg believes that the difference between Dewey's talk of "experience" and my talk of "language"—between the historical Dewey and my hypothetical, purified, up-dated Dewey—has major socio-political implications. He ends his essay by contrasting my blindness to "the world of experience that lies beneath and beyond language" with James' and Dewey's clear vision of this world. On his view, having such a vi-
sion is "a necessary although not sufficient condition for advancing toward the democratic goals of equality and autonomy."

I doubt that the difference between philosophy before and after the so-called "linguistic turn," or the difference between Wilfrid Sellars' doctrine that "all awareness is a linguistic affair" and the view of a defender of prelinguistic awareness such as John Searle, has any socio-political implications at all.1 The question of whether there is such a "world of experience," insofar as it is relevant to anything I have written, is the question of whether Sellars is right. That, in turn, is tied up with such questions as whether those born blind can understand the meaning of the word "red," whether there is something it is like to be a bat, whether highly intelligent machines are necessarily conscious, whether consciousness can reasonably be thought of as having emerged at a definite moment in biological evolution (like a light bulb suddenly going on), and other topics which only philosophy professors find worth debating. I see no reason whatsoever to think that the conclusions one reaches on issues of this sort matter much when it comes to decisions about how to advance the democratic goals of equality and autonomy.2

Kloppenberg, and several other contributors to this volume, picture me as a languid aesthete who has lost touch with hard facts, political reality, and human suffering, and taken refuge in a private world in which "only language" exists. This is the same bum rap that nonphilosophers have been blithely, and ignorantly, laying on Derrida for years. The suggestions that language is something other than one more piece of reality, and that linguistic behavior is somehow less "hard" than what is "given in experience," need only to be stated to be dismissed. The picture of "postmodernist" philosophers living in a world composed exclusively of words is as irrelevant to debates between philosophers as was Dr. Johnson's refutation of Berkeley.

My picture of the American left in the twentieth century may well be over-simplified and even distorted, and my philosophical views may well be wrong. But the two should be evaluated separately from one other. Philosophy is a respectable intellectual discipline, with its own dialectic and its own internal momentum. Intellectual historians should be chary of the idea that they can skim off the "significance" of a counterintuitive philosophical view without having thought through the conflicts between intuitions which led the philosophers to propound their paradoxes.

NOTES

This note may be as good a place as any to note that Casey Blake is mistaken when he says that after Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature was published in 1979 I "largely turned my back on academic philosophy." The papers in my 1998 collection Truth and Progress still pick the same highly professionalized nits as did my 1979 book.

1. Searle, I must admit, disagrees with me on this point. See the transcript of a debate between us: "Rorty v. Searle, At Last: A Debate," Logos 2, no. 3 (Summer 1999), 20–67.

2. I have, however, argued elsewhere, especially in "Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism" (Revue internationale de philosophie [1999]) and in the concluding section of "Is truth a goal of inquiry?" (Philosophy Quarterly [1995]) that in the very long run conceding Sellars' point—giving up on the idea of nonlinguistic experience—would be good for the culture of democratic societies. But in the short run I cannot see that those on Sellars' side are likely to be less interested in combating poverty and greed, or less skillful at doing so, than are his opponents.