

COPING AND CONVERSING: THE LIMITS AND PROMISE OF PRAGMATISM

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IS PRAGMATISM THE GOLDEN MEAN BETWEEN dogmatism and skepticism, realism and anti-realism, absolute correspondence and arbitrary convention? We must first ask about the Scylla and Charybdis we seek to avoid.¹ Just what sort of a monster is the dogmatism that threatens to devour us if we are not careful, and what sort of maelstrom is the skepticism in which we are in danger of being swept away as we flee the monster?

Dogmatism as Realism, Skepticism as Anti-Realism

Dogmatism and realism are closely connected. It is all too often said that realism is the claim that the world is out there, regardless of what we think about it or even whether we think about it. But Kant makes

¹ [Editor's note: In Greek mythology, Scylla and Charybdis were monsters residing on opposite sides of a body of water, through which ships sailed. The fear was that, in attempting to avoid one, the boat would fall prey to the other.]

this claim—that is what the thing in itself is all about—and he is the paradigmatic anti-realist. Both in analytic and in continental philosophy, anti-realism is often a series of footnotes to Kant. We need a definition of realism that distinguishes it from Kant's claims about the world as it is in itself. An adequate definition of realism needs to include the following two claims: 1) the world is and is what it is regardless of what or whether we think about it; and 2) when we have knowledge (the extent of which can remain an open question), we know the world exactly as it is independently of our thought about it. Kant defined dogmatism in realistic terms as the assumption that we can know the object (any object, not just God, freedom, and immortality) as it is in itself. While it is trivially true that we would have no knowledge apart from our thinking, according to realism, our thought plays no constitutive role in shaping that knowledge. The metaphor of the mind as the mirror of nature expresses this realist idea eloquently.² This is why the contrast between the absolute and the arbitrary can be interpreted in terms of absolute *correspondence*.

If dogmatism is construed as realism, in this sense, skepticism would then be anti-realism, the denial of these claims. The middle way we are seeking will be a form of anti-realism, but unlike skepticism, it will not conclude that “all judgment in regard to the object is completely null and void.”³ It will not accept the all or nothing, either/or, on which the dogmatist and skeptic are agreed. In denying the absolutist claims of the dogmatist, it will not conclude that everything is arbitrary. So our search will be for a viable anti-realism. Since Kant found criticism, or critique, to be a viable anti-realism, a middle ground between dogmatism and skepticism, our question might become whether pragmatism is or can be the critical philosophy, or critique, of our time.

Although it is usually overlooked, there is a distinctly theological dimension to Kant's Copernican revolution. He regularly distinguishes

² Thus Richard Rorty speaks of “truth without mirrors” in seeking an alternative to classical correspondence theory (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979] 295).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 388-9.

between, on the one hand, appearances or the phenomenal world as the way reality appears to us, and, on the other hand, the thing in itself or the noumenal world as the way that same reality appears to God as creator of the world.⁴ Divine knowledge is the measure of the way things are, and to know things in themselves would be to know them as God knows them, to see them through divine eyes. The realist may be discoursing about cabbages or kings and need not be talking about God, but whatever the subject matter, the claim is that when we achieve genuine knowledge, we occupy a standpoint as unsurpassable as that attributed to God by the theist. That is why I have identified realism as the theory of *absolute* correspondence.

Realism need not be a denial of human finitude, but any finitude affirmed will be quantitative and not qualitative. It will consist in acknowledging that 1) we sometimes get it wrong; 2) even when we get it right, it often takes us time to do so; and 3) there are many facts completely beyond our reach. But these limitations are carefully located outside what counts as knowledge. When we know, we hold to a proposition that corresponds to, is adequate to, or perfectly mirrors the fact (or, if you prefer, the event) in question.

This view has many presuppositions. I want to mention two of them, which, if not utterly necessary to every possible realism, are in fact so common that they deserve note. One is the atomic view of facts and propositions. If one can have adequate knowledge of one fact while being mistaken about another and wholly ignorant of a third, the facts must be externally related to each other. This ontological atomism requires a semantic atomism as well. If the meaning of one proposition is internally related to that of another, I won't know what I mean by the one unless I understand the other, and I cannot be said to believe the one unless I believe the other. Holism, whether ontological or semantic, will be a serious problem for the atomistic ontology and semantics that most realisms presuppose.

⁴ For textual analysis, see my "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," *Kant-Studien* 59.1 (1968): 118-41.

The second assumption widely found in realist theories is what I call the “proposition presupposition.”⁵ If one has been socialized into a certain language game especially widespread among philosophers, propositions will seem like the most harmless and non-controversial of entities. But they involve a Platonism that is anything but self-evident. Sentences and statements are understood to occur within some human language, natural or artificial, such as English, Russian, or Pig-Latin. But propositions are understood differently. We are told that the English, French, and German sentences, “I love you,” “Je t’aime,” and “Ich liebe dich,” all express the same proposition and that it is not itself in English, French, or German—but not because it is in Swahili. Sentences and statements may occur in the cave of human languages, but propositions belong to a heavenly realm uncontaminated by such contingency. The existence of such entities is thought to be evident from the fact that we can translate sentences or statements from one language to another.

But this account of translation is not the only possible one, and it is anything but self-evident; nor is it obvious that when we begin to philosophize we have already transcended the limits of the particular language we speak and ascended to a semantic sunshine of the sort posited by Plato. In assuming without argument that we have immediate access to a world of propositions, to a semantic region not embedded in a language game with all the practices and institutions that give it life, the realist begs too many questions. For if, as many philosophers would now argue, our meanings are relative to the language in which they are expressed, “I love you” will not be semantically identical with “Ich liebe dich.” Where will we find that exact mirror of the world that the realist needs? On this account I do not become a dogmatist by saying that correspondence is the meaning of truth. I become a dogmatist when I claim that some parts of our cognitive life, precisely the ones that deserve the name knowledge, achieve this ideal.

⁵ I have discussed the “proposition presupposition” in “Taking Plantinga Seriously: Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16.2 (April 1999): 173-81.

The skeptic, of course, is the one who denies this achievement. Skeptics and dogmatists are often in agreement that these are the only two possibilities, and they often seek to justify their own position by pointing to the difficulties of the opposite view. But the Kantian model with which we are working claims that there are at least two different ways of parting company with dogmatism. So we need to have a working definition of skepticism that will leave some space between it and dogmatism; for unless we leave such space we can hardly ask our question as to whether pragmatism is well suited to fill it. "Skepticism," as I am using the term, is the view that 1) since we are somehow systematically cut off from correspondence; 2) our construals of the world will have about them a contingency suggested by calling them conventions (assuming they are not utterly idiosyncratic); and 3) these conventions are arbitrary, wholly without basis or constraint.

While it is not hard to find living examples of dogmatism as I have defined it, the same is not true of skepticism. Although dogmatists like to hang the "anything goes" sign like a scarlet letter on those who do not bow before their orthodoxies, one will be hard put to find someone who thinks or who tells us we should think that all views, being equally arbitrary, are equally viable. Still skepticism, as I have defined it, is useful, not as a description of a widespread philosophical position, but as an account of how not to oppose dogmatism if a third, middle way is to be sought. Let us call this view strong skepticism. But "critique," the Kantian name for a third or middle way between dogmatism and skepticism, signifies a skeptical attitude toward dogmatic claims. Let us use the term "weak skepticism" to designate those anti-realists (the overwhelming majority, so far as I can tell) who reject both realism and the dyadic all-or-nothing view of the matter it often espouses and thus do not embrace the view that we have nothing but purely arbitrary conventions. The philosophical landscape today, as I see it, is a two-party system made up of realists and weak skeptics.⁶

⁶ This is not the analytic/continental divide. For while most continental philosophers are weak skeptics, there are significant realist and anti-realist regions within analytic philosophy. This is what makes it possible for Nancy C. Murphy to write *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder: Westview, 1997) (though weak skepticism is not limited to the postmodern subdivision of continental philosophy).

Is Rorty's Pragmatism a Viable Third Way?

Our question becomes: Is pragmatism the weak skepticism that will be the viable third way between absolute correspondence and arbitrary convention? Rather than attempt to speak of pragmatism in general, I will speak of Richard Rorty's pragmatism, focusing all but exclusively on the formulations of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,⁷ and also bring Dewey into the conversation.

Rorty's anti-realist credentials are impeccable. The task of language, he argues, is not to provide us with accurate representations of the world in the way in which science, philosophy, and religion have traditionally purported to do.⁸ So Rorty associates himself with those who try to break with the notion that our beliefs are supposed to correspond to reality, that they are either adequate or inadequate to the world: "Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, James, Dewey, Goodman, Sellars, Putnam, Davidson and others."⁹ Another way to put this is to say that like the language in which it is expressed, truth is not discovered but created.¹⁰ Here we have a familiar Kantian theme: language plays a constitutive and not merely a descriptive role vis-à-vis the world. This does not mean that the world is not "out there" independently of what we say about it. But it does mean that the world, which can cause us to have beliefs in the language game in which we have been socialized, does not propose (much less dictate) what language game we should use, nor does it choose among the language games we propose.¹¹ Our language games are in a significant sense accidents of history; hence Rorty's historicism is virtually synonymous with his claim that our language games are contingent.

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Already in his book *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), Rorty made it clear that for him the linguistic turn had become a pragmatic turn. And already in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he had made clear the anti-realist horizon of his thought.

⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 3-4.

⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 10; cf. 13, 21.

¹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi, 3, 7.

¹¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5-6; see also 6, 16, and 20 on the philosophy of science of Kuhn and Hesse, which is an important horizon for these claims.

Three features of Rorty's anti-realism are especially noteworthy. First, he explicitly rejects "the idea that there are nonlinguistic things called 'meanings' which it is the task of language to express, as well as the idea that there are nonlinguistic things called 'facts' which it is the task of language to represent."¹² Rorty thinks it is necessary to "de-divinize" the world in order to shake free from this realism.¹³ No doubt theism is committed to something like the notion that God has a nonhuman "language of his own."¹⁴ But Kant and Kierkegaard, to say nothing of Aquinas, should be sufficient to remind us that theism is not necessarily committed to the claim that we have direct access to that language and encode it in natural languages that "express" the propositions that are, so to speak, God's sentences. One need not be an atheist, like Rorty, to be an anti-realist. It is sufficient for the theist to acknowledge that we are not God epistemically any more than ontologically, that is, we cannot know as God knows any more than we can be God.¹⁵

Second, Rorty's anti-realism rejects the notion that "the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called 'facts.'"¹⁶ In spite of his deliberate talk of sentences rather than propositions, he warns against "confining attention to single sentences as opposed to vocabularies." We must rather "turn from individual sentences to vocabularies as wholes" and, moreover, remember that they are "examples of alternative language games."¹⁷ In other words, the wholes in question are not merely semantic totalities, but semantic totalities embedded in the richer networks of institutions and practices that make language games into forms of life.

¹² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 13.

¹³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 21, 40.

¹⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

¹⁵ I have written about theistic anti-realism in "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 161-79; and in "In Defense of the Thing in Itself."

¹⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

Third, Rorty's anti-realism is the flip side of his pragmatism. If language is not a medium for mirroring the world, providing accurate representations that copy and thereby correspond to it, what is it? Briefly put, language is a collection of tools for coping with the world.¹⁸ Given Rorty's insistence that we think of theories as tools, it is fitting that his own pragmatism is not so much a theory as a metaphor (language is a box of tools), which he uses as a tool to pry us loose from adequation models of thinking about thinking.

Before we can ask whether Rorty's pragmatism is the *via media* we seek between absolute correspondence and arbitrary convention, we must address a fairly obvious objection, namely that Rorty's insistence on the contingency of our vocabularies leaves us with nothing but arbitrary convention. In other words, the objection is that Rorty is a strong skeptic, and his pragmatism is the maelstrom we seek to avoid rather than the safe passage we seek.

Rorty tells us, for example, that any criteria by which we might try to decide between competing descriptions of the world will be internal to one of several language games "which we do not choose between by reference to criteria."¹⁹ This is not to say that we will not try to justify our language games with the help of criteria that are internal to them, but arguments about justification will be "question-begging."²⁰ With thinly disguised glee Rorty points us to Dewey, Oakeshott, and Rawls as three thinkers "who wanted to retain Enlightenment liberalism while dropping Enlightenment rationalism" and who "would happily grant that a circular justification of our practices...is the only sort of justification we are going to get."²¹ As a liberal ironist, he insists that "there

¹⁸ The tool metaphor is the most frequent expression of Rorty's pragmatism; see Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 12-13, 19, 21, 44, 53, 55. In addition to coping (15, 18), he also speaks the language of usefulness (15, 48, 55, 115), efficiency (12), adjustment (33), adaptation (33, 35, 45), coming to terms (35), handling (14), and what works (148).

¹⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5; see also 48 and 59. Almost immediately after this statement, Rorty refers us to Thomas Kuhn. See note 11 above.

²⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 9.

²¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 57.

is no answer to the question ‘Why not be cruel?’—no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible.”²²

By itself this acknowledgment of unavoidable circularity, while devastating to foundationalist strategies for epistemic justification, is not sufficient evidence of strong skepticism. None of the three thinkers just mentioned by Rorty is widely perceived as an enthusiast for arbitrary convention. This break with a certain form of Enlightenment rationalism is not *ipso facto* an expression of strong skepticism; in fact, it is not even incompatible with the realism I have designated as dogmatism.

Still, other comments Rorty makes give pause. When he describes liberalism as no more than a “widely shared conviction”²³; or when he agrees with Sellars that “morality is a matter of...‘we-intentions’, that the core meaning of ‘immoral action’ is ‘the sort of thing *we* don’t do,’” and that correspondingly it is “impossible to ask the question, ‘Is ours a moral society?’”²⁴ it surely sounds as if moral values are nothing but arbitrary conventions, as if the answer to questions about justification is simply “*this language-game is played.*”²⁵ But what if “we” are fascists?

At this point we might be tempted to think we should have stuck to the safer path at the outset and chosen Dewey as our pragmatist. Rorty’s assault on the relativity of inquiry to language games that are particular and contingent rather than universal and necessary and on argument as circular and question-begging may suggest he represents the problem and not its solution. By contrast, Dewey’s break with tradition is not to abandon inquiry but rather to redefine logic as the theory of inquiry, especially scientific inquiry.²⁶ Like Hume, he will “attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects.”²⁷

²² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.

²³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 84.

²⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 59.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958) 167, par. 654.

²⁶ See John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938). Part IV is entitled “The Logic of Scientific Method.”

²⁷ This phrase is from the subtitle of Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

So perhaps we should leave Rorty twisting in the wind and see if Dewey will give us a pragmatism clearly distanced from the strong skepticism of arbitrary conventions. His task will not be easy. A philosophy that invokes the experimental method and goes under the name of instrumentalism would seem well equipped to help us answer questions about the most effective means to achieve whatever ends we may have in view. But what about those ends? It seems that there are three questions which science is not equipped to answer, and so central are they to the moral life, whether personal or political, that they could be taken together to define the moral domain. They are: 1) What ends should we seek, or what is intrinsically worthwhile?; 2) How should we rank these ends, or which one trumps which when they come into conflict in a given situation?; and 3) In the pursuit of our ends, which means are permitted and which forbidden? In looking at Dewey's invocation of science, I turn to his famous essay, "The Construction of the Good," and focus, as he does, on the first of these questions.

Dewey rejects without argument any attempt to superimpose eternal, immutable, and transcendent values on experience, whether these are grounded in reason or revelation. But he equally rejects any attempt to base our values on experience in such a way as to obliterate

the difference between the enjoyed and the enjoyable, the desired and the desirable, the *satisfying* and the *satisfactory*. To say that something is enjoyed is to make a statement about a fact, something already in existence; it is not to judge the value of that fact.... The fact that something is desired only raises the *question* of its desirability; it does not settle it.²⁸

Our desires and enjoyments need regulation and guidance.²⁹

²⁸ John Dewey, "The Construction of the Good," *The Quest for Certainty* (1929; New York: Putnam's, 1960) 260.

²⁹ Dewey, "The Construction of the Good," 264.

Dewey gives us two accounts of how to get from desired to desirable, from fact of experience to norm for behavior. The first is that in order to be genuine values, our enjoyments must be the result of “intelligent operations,” “intelligent action,” “intelligent behavior.”³⁰ Judgments of value can be called judgments of taste without evoking sheer arbitrariness when such judgments result from “intelligent appreciation.”³¹

But what is this intelligence? In an instrumentalist context, it primarily signifies skill at finding the best means to whatever ends we have in view. But that is no help here, for the question is what ends we should espouse. In the merely instrumentalist sense, fascists such as Eichmann are intelligent. If, to avoid this awkward result, we assimilate intelligence to what reason was classically, the discoverer (or legislator) of true values, the result will be a patently circular argument. Intelligent operations, action, behavior, and appreciation cannot be the criteria of genuine values because those values will be the criteria of intelligence. Since we have, on Dewey’s account, no access to eternal, immutable, transcendent values either by reason or revelation, it will be in terms of values embedded in the institutions and practices of “our” language game that we distinguish genuine intelligence from mere cleverness at getting the results we want. Rorty is harder to leave behind than we hoped.

Dewey’s second account of how we get from desired to desirable can be seen as an attempt to define intelligence causally. Genuine values are linked to likings, but only to those

that judgment has approved, after examination of the relation upon which the object liked depends.... If we know the conditions under which the act of liking, of desire and enjoyment, takes place, we are in a position to know what are the consequences of that act.³²

³⁰ Dewey, “The Construction of the Good,” 258-9.

³¹ Dewey, “The Construction of the Good,” 262.

³² Dewey, “The Construction of the Good,” 264-6.

Dewey knows that his “causal and operational definition gives only a conception of a value, not a value itself. But,” he assures us, “*the utilization of the conception in action results in an object having secure and significant value.*”³³ How so? Once again we face the same dilemma: If our knowledge of the connections, interactions, conditions, and consequences of our enjoyments is not guided by some values established (somehow) ahead of time, it will just add a further body of merely factual knowledge to the fact that we desire this or that. If my fascist enjoyment of a city free of Jews is accompanied by knowledge of the conditions of its occurrence, including an efficient system of rail transport and gas chambers, and of the consequences of its occurrence, including the perishing of many of my neighbors in those gas chambers, will that tell me whether my enjoyment is a genuine value?

Dewey’s affirmation of scientific procedure and inquiry is not able to save us from Rorty’s skepticism. On the contrary, the latter’s analyses show us with distressing precision just why and where Dewey’s project cannot work. It is far from clear that the values Dewey needs to make his pragmatism work can be anything more than the “we-intentions” or “widely shared convictions” in terms of which we evaluate the facts about our desires and enjoyments together with facts about their conditions and consequences, just as it is far from clear that Dewey can meaningfully ask, “Is ours a moral society?”³⁴ That Dewey is not aware of the precariousness of his situation is not a strength of his theory but a weakness. It is a valiant but ultimately futile attempt to carry out Hume’s “attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects.” More generally, perhaps we should see it as the last gasp of late modernity’s project of replacing theology and metaphysics with science as the legitimation of our moral life, both personal and political.

³³ Dewey, “The Construction of the Good,” 259, emphasis added.

³⁴ Of course, both Dewey and Rorty can ask that question in forms which presuppose the value of our values, such as, “Given our commitment to liberal democracy, how well do we live up to our profession, our we-intentions?” The question they can’t ask, at least in the traditional sense, is whether our we-intentions are good, whether we have the right values.

Back to Rorty. We didn't give him a chance to respond to our fear that he might be a strong skeptic, but he has several responses to offer.

First, if the upholder of arbitrary convention is supposed to be the one who thinks all options equally good—the “anything goes...since God is dead everything is permitted” position—Rorty clearly does not fit. He constantly speaks of progress, making it clear that he thinks some alternatives are better than others. Accordingly, the liberal ironists among whom he would like to be counted would be “people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment.”³⁵

Second, Rorty thinks the term “arbitrary” is a misleading description of our “choices” in these matters. Drawing on Kuhnian philosophy of science, he writes,

The realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary.... The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of “arbitrary” choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another. Europe did not decide to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually

³⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 61. Rorty's account of commitments evokes Climacus' account of faith in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) I, 203-4: “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.... But the definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty.” Or, Rorty might say, between commitment and irony.

lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.³⁶

This way of thinking lies behind the further claim that we

should see allegiance to social institutions as no more matters for justification by reference to familiar, commonly accepted premises—but also as no more arbitrary—than choices of friends or heroes. Such choices are not made by reference to criteria. They cannot be preceded by presuppositionless critical reflection, conducted in no particular language and outside of any particular historical context.³⁷

Third, and most important, the strong skeptic will say, “This is what I prefer.... These are our intentions.... This language game is played.... End of conversation.” But for Rorty, discovery of the conflict of interpretations, the plurality of irreconcilable language games is the beginning and not the end of the conversation. Borrowing a phrase from Oakeshott, Rorty concludes *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with reflections on “Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind.” He encourages us to be

well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification.... The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers’ moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West.³⁸

Rorty doesn’t talk about conversation by name very much in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, but that motif is definitely there.

³⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 6.

³⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 54.

³⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 389-94.

Rorty thinks that philosophical arguments will turn out to be question-begging and that the search for “algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas”³⁹ will prove futile. So, the charge of relativism “should not be answered but rather evaded. We should learn to brush aside [such] questions...”⁴⁰ But this brushing aside, this evasion, is not the refusal to converse. It is only the refusal to talk on realist assumptions. So, in the face of anxieties about irrationalism, immorality, relativism, and so forth, instead of launching a counter-argument, “my strategy will be to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject...”⁴¹ The underlying assumption here is that “anything [can] be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed.”⁴² Rorty thinks that journalists and novelists may well be better at this than philosophers.⁴³ In what has come to be a standard cliché about postmodernism, he gives priority to rhetoric over logic.⁴⁴ But the point to notice is this: constructing narratives to make things look better or worse by redescribing them is a way of continuing the conversation. It invokes a conception of conversation that is hardly neutral, but it does not purport to be; nor does it exclude from the conversation those with a different understanding of what they are up to when they converse with Rorty. Conversational open-mindedness

should not be fostered because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail, nor because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. It should be fostered for its own sake. *A liberal society is one*

³⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.

⁴⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 54. On this notion of evasion, see “Deconstruction and Circumvention” in Rorty’s *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 44.

⁴² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 7.

⁴³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi.

⁴⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 51

*which is content to call "true" whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be.*⁴⁵

Pragmatism, Conversation, and Coping

We can now rephrase more precisely our question as to whether Rorty's pragmatism is a satisfactory middle way between the dogmatism of absolute correspondence and the strong skepticism of arbitrary conventions. Pragmatism as a theory of coping is at best incomplete. For in order to begin coping with the world, to say nothing of determining whether we are coping well, we need to know what the problem is that needs to be solved. In reference to the fascist: Is the problem that there are too many Jews or that there is too much anti-Semitism? As long as the values by which we recognize that (and how) situations are problematic are but arbitrary conventions, pragmatism will not be the middle way but one of the extremes to be avoided. As we have seen, even Dewey's attempt to avoid this consequence by appeal to science and method fails precisely because, while he can tell us what will happen if we do such and such, he cannot tell us what is intrinsically worthwhile, what ends we ought to seek. Rorty's pragmatism is as skeptical about science as it is about theology and metaphysics.⁴⁶ But, at least in its own self-understanding, it is weak rather than strong skepticism, since it does not conclude that our highest values (final vocabulary) are arbitrary conventions. So the question becomes: Does Rorty's account of conversation provide the needed completion to pragmatism as a theory of coping? My response is sixfold.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 52. I take it that Rorty is making here the same point he makes with a little more rhetorical license when he suggests that truth is "what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 176).

⁴⁶ This means that theology and metaphysics, as long as they do not make claims to adequation, need not be intimidated by huffing and puffing about scientific objectivity. Rorty implicitly recognizes this in his treatment of Kierkegaard. He is no Kierkegaardian Christian, but six of his seven references to Kierkegaard in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* are positive, while the seventh is neutral.

First, I think Rorty has pointed us in the right direction. In answer to the question, intended to be rhetorical, “What is left but the anarchy of the arbitrary?,” he answers calmly, “Conversation”—open, free conversation, with nothing precluded a priori, including the dogmatism and strong skepticism he hopes to avoid. Whether we call it irony, or weak skepticism, or epistemic humility, this recognition of the relativity and contingency of our language games avoids dogmatism while leaving us with something—conversation—rather than nothing.

Second, with the turn to conversation, we abandon anything uniquely pragmatic. Pragmatists are not the only ones to offer conversation as the move beyond dogmatism. In addition to Socrates, there are also Buber and Marcel and Levinas and Habermas and Gadamer, to mention only a few. The moment we turn from the monological concept of reason characteristic of dogmatism to the dialogical concept embodied in the idea of conversation, we are beyond the pale of pragmatism. Various pragmatists may well have something to contribute to the conversation about conversation, but pragmatism is not the one Moses who can lead us out of the absolutism of Egypt or through the arbitrariness of the wilderness to the promised land.

Third, any adequate understanding of conversation will need to incorporate elements from the non-pragmatist descriptions. Rorty is not inclined to think so. For example, he agrees with Habermas that

the only general account to be given of our criteria for truth is one which refers to “undistorted communication,” but I do not think there is much to be said about what counts as “undistorted” except “the sort you get when you have democratic political institutions and the conditions for making these institutions function.”... In contrast, Habermas and those who agree with him that *Ideologiekritik* is central to philosophy think that there is quite a lot to say.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 84 and 84n.

I agree with Habermas that there is a lot to be said about the various ways in which, even within formal democracy, conversation is distorted. No one can sincerely doubt (without the benefit of massive self-deception, which is what *Ideologiekritik* is all about) that “soft money” distorts the conversation that is contemporary American politics. Nor, in view of what came to light in Florida, is there any doubt that currently employed electoral technologies deny voters equal protection under the law and distort the conversation about our ends and the means to achieve them. These are serious distortions that affect who gets elected and what laws get passed, yet they occur in the midst of “democratic political institutions” that “function.” The problem is that they are not so very democratic and they do not function very well. There is an unacceptable complacency in Rorty’s pragmatism that surfaces in his easy dismissal of Habermas’ concern that what we call democracy may be riddled with distorted conversation. If theories are tools, then Habermasian theorizing in particular and *Ideologiekritik* in general are tools every would-be democracy needs to help it live up to its own professed values.

Fourth, it should be noted that in the passage just cited from Rorty, it is the *criteria* of truth that are in question. We might say that he wants to replace correspondence with consensus as the *meaning* or *definition* of truth; but it would be more accurate to say that he wishes to replace correspondence talk with coping talk so as to abandon truth talk altogether.⁴⁸ But neither of these moves is required by weak skepticism. We might, with Habermas and Peirce, adopt a consensus theory, not just of the criteria of truth, but also of the meaning of truth. Or we might hold that correspondence is the meaning of truth and that, in the absence of our ability to achieve this lofty goal, conversational consensus is the best approximation we have to go on. In neither case is it necessary for us to abandon truth talk. We might do well to remind ourselves on a regular basis that it is truth and not Truth that we are claiming, that when we make truth claims (as we can hardly fail to

⁴⁸ Linda Alcoff takes issue with Rorty on just this issue in her splendid essay included in this issue of *The Hedgehog Review*. From a somewhat different perspective, I agree with her that we need not give up truth talk.

keep on doing) we are not claiming to have achieved Absolute Correspondence. But then, we are not God, and we can thank those who help us resist the temptation to forget this, even when, like Rorty, they are not willing to make the distinction between truth and Truth.

Fifth, there is no essential link between the conversational anti-realism I am defending and Rorty's atheism.⁴⁹ The reminder that we are not God will be especially welcome to the theist, who believes that someone else is. The theist may well hold that Absolute Correspondence is for God alone, since to see things as they truly are is to see them just as God sees them, an achievement we are cut off from both by virtue of our created finitude and our fallenness.⁵⁰ Conversational anti-realism is even open to the claim of divine revelation that many theists wish to make. It does not preclude a Divine Other who invades our language games and is a source of meaning not derived therefrom. Transcendence need not be limited to the ways in which "we transcend." It might be something that happens to us. But this claim need not entail that we have been transported into the land of Absolute Correspondence.⁵¹ Rather we will find ourselves thrown into a whole host of conversations about 1) whether there is such a thing as divine revelation; 2) if so, where it is to be found; and 3) if found in this particular sacred text, how we should interpret and understand it. These conversations will take place in and among language games that are all too human.

⁴⁹ In his probing essay in this issue, John Stuhr wishes to lead pragmatism away even from the naturalizing modes of spirituality and transcendence found in some earlier forms. My argument is that even in its Rortyan, anti-realist version, pragmatism as such does not preclude robustly theistic, even biblical religion, but can be appropriated by such faith.

⁵⁰ I have explored the theological foundations of the hermeneutics of suspicion in "Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category," *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) and in *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

⁵¹ The Thomistic doctrine of analogy clearly precludes this possibility, as, I believe, does the Calvinist teaching about divine accommodation. See Ford Lewis Battles, "God as Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984). I recall the Calvinist theologian who used to say that the Bible is "the divinely revealed misinformation about God."

Finally, the conversation in terms of which Rorty defines a liberal society involves openness both of mind and heart to those not like ourselves. It is not easy to be genuinely open to the otherness of the Other. To acknowledge and to welcome the Other as embodying claims on us, claims of truth and of value, takes more than the laissez faire latitudinarianism of a lackadaisical liberalism. It requires a decentering of the ego that doesn't exactly come naturally, either at the theoretical or at the practical level, either to the religious or to the secular mindset, even if, as Marcel, Levinas, and Gadamer suggest—may Rorty forgive them—it belongs to our deepest nature. There is need of serious and sustained conversation about this decentering, and our best guides will not be those usually called pragmatists.

Perhaps it is too much to say that distortion and alterity are blind spots for pragmatism. Perhaps it is enough to say that Rorty inherits from Dewey a cheerfulness that keeps them both from being as helpful as others on these issues. On questions of certainty and correspondence, we might call them postmodern. But they share with modernity a blithe Pelagianism that disinclines them to give sufficient attention to the difficulties of conversation even in “democratic” societies that have prevailed over fascism and communism. They might be more authentically American, and even better philosophers, if they had a good dose of Puritanism, at least a phenomenological if not a theological appreciation for original sin.⁵² “Puritanical pragmatism”—like Peirce’s “pragmaticism,” this term is “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers.”⁵³ We needn't worry about starting a new fad and having to make the rounds of the talk shows. But that's OK. It leaves us time to consider at leisure what sort of amendments and supplements pragmatism will need if it is to become the good ship *Via Media*.

⁵² I often refer to Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre as the great secular theologians of original sin.

⁵³ Charles Sanders Peirce, “What Pragmatism Is,” *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) V, 277. The puritanism of which I speak is closer to that of the first puritans than to that of the “last puritan,” who still flirts too much with spirituality and transcendence as John Stuhr sees it in his essay in this issue of *The Hedgehog Review*.