

RORTY'S NEO-PRAGMATISM: RESHAPING HUMAN CONDITION WITH OUR THOUGHTS

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Introduction

Of late, some philosophers have come out to condemn Rorty's Neo-pragmatism as a distortion of the central goals of classical pragmatism, a great disservice to the contemporary pragmatic campaign. A good example of such thinkers is James Kloppenberg, who in his article, *Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?* Labels Rorty's pragmatism as “...insufficiently pragmatic...”¹. For him, Rorty's “*liberal ironism encourages selfishness, cynicism, and resignation by undercutting efforts to confront the hard facts of poverty and greed*”².

Susan Haack, who is strongly convinced that Rorty misses the point of the early pragmatists, and primarily tilts the pragmatist legacy, terms Rorty's pragmatism “*vulgar pragmatism*”³. Basically, she is perturbed by “*Rorty's hopes of a post-philosophical culture in which 'we pragmatists' give up the old-fashioned idea that truth is a goal of inquiry, and remake philosophy as a genre of literature, just a kind of writing*”⁴. Haack concludes that “*playfulness has its price ...*

literary dilettantism of Rortyesque neo-pragmatism is crippled by its disastrous inability even to acknowledge the truths that literature can teach us"⁵.

Other contemporary thinkers⁶ have toed this line of thought in their attempt to disregard, and if possible totally eradicate Rorty's brand of pragmatism. Specifically, the work that triggered this write-up is *Rorty's Point of Departure from Mainstream Pragmatist Approach to Epistemology* by Raymond Osei and Husein Inusah⁷. Here, Osei and Inusah sort to demonstrate that "*Rorty's pragmatist theory is a deviation from mainstream pragmatism*", as his pragmatism repudiates epistemology⁸.

It is pertinent to state here that Rorty's critique of epistemology is the most misinterpreted and, consequently, the most criticized part of his philosophical project. While this work is not a defense of Rorty's pragmatism, we have to clarify some misinterpretations of Rorty's philosophical concerns by the above thinkers.

Firstly, we need to state categorically that Rorty's attack was on representationalist epistemologies (especially as championed by Descartes and Kant), not epistemology as such. In addition, Rorty has done more than anyone to revivify pragmatism. In fact, his pragmatism reaffirms many of the central aims of the early forerunners of the movement. Rorty's critique of representationalist epistemologies, his socialization of knowledge, and his emphasis on both fallibilism and possibility clearly keep in line with the pragmatist tradition. By bringing these pragmatist methods and concerns back into the fold, Rorty revitalized a rich philosophical tradition, thus enabling it to be put to use for inquiry into contemporary problems. More practically, Rorty's philosophy has vital things to say in an epoch dominated by deconstructionists whose record appears less edifying to social structures. What makes Rorty so stimulating in the present intellectual climate is his readiness to uphold an object of affirmation that functions in company with his criticism. Rorty's idea of a post-philosophical culture, in which traditional intellectual constraints will give way to lively ironism and a more egalitarian society, is a source of hope in times when all the effects of global

capitalism are being established, terror is the new warfare, and fewer and fewer intellectual discourses seek to address concrete social realities. It is in this historically-specific concern for the problems of men that Rorty best shows his pragmatist credentials.

Pluralism is a central feature in the history of pragmatism that allows Rorty's position to be validated as sufficiently pragmatist. For Peirce, a community of diverse minds was the only real means to refine knowledge and reach a final opinion. James held pluralism to be a critical philosophical and moral concept. In a Pluralistic Universe, James claims that there exists no final word, no one true perspective. He notes that "*the pluralistic view ... is willing to believe that there may ultimately never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made*"⁹. In this acquiescence to the pluralistic universe, James sustains that mankind can leave its mark through dynamic, active creation.

For Dewey, pluralism encourages diversity in perspectives, which serves to multiply the capacities of human knowledge and discovery. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey contends that "*every combination of human forces that adds its own contribution of value to life has for that reason its own unique and ultimate worth*"¹⁰. Indeed, Rorty's emphasis on conversation is tacitly pluralist. For Rorty, knowledge is contingent upon admittance to a particular language-game, which depends on a confluence of social and historical factors that define the sort of conversation taking place. Thus, knowledge is not singular, but plural, depending on place and time. A consistent emphasis among the early pragmatists, then, was on the value of several perspectives in the testing of ideas and the formation of knowledge. It is in this vein that Rorty's voice cannot be dismissed as distinct from the pragmatist tradition.

This write-up, while not taking up the task of defending Rorty's pragmatism, strives to show that Rorty's Neo-pragmatism supports the thesis that our thought (philosophy) can bear a hand in reshaping human condition.

Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism

Pragmatism, as a philosophical ideology, stirs a multiplicity of meanings. To the common person, it suggests a sense of the American character, as Americans are historically known for pragmatic choices that effect practical consequences. Pragmatism can also suggest many things: a methodological approach for solving problems in the sciences and humanities; a term used by intellectual historians to describe a particular idea at a particular moment in American history; and so on. The multitude of meanings prescribed to the term is indicative of the difficulty of tying down pragmatism.

As a philosophical field of inquiry, pragmatism is concerned with the practical significances of knowledge. William James reasons that “*the whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one*”¹¹. James gives voice to an important reoccurring feature of pragmatism: a passion for results, consequences, practicality, and value of knowledge and the means used to derive such knowledge.

Common among the early pragmatists is the pre-eminence conferred upon experience. Although Peirce, James, and Dewey all hold divergent views of experience, the epistemological work of experience is the unifying thread that binds them together. On the surface, the emphasis on experience would appear to place pragmatism within the larger tradition that began with Locke and Berkeley. The critical difference between those usually identified as the British empiricists and the pragmatists is found in the rapport that exists between knowledge and experience. For Locke, the epistemological role of experience is to provide the medium for coming to know ideas. That is, ideas are derived from experience. For the pragmatists, experience is transformed into an epistemological mechanism for evaluating ideas as they are encountered in reality. Hence, pragmatists are concerned mainly with the consequences of experience and how experience can be used to test a store of ideas¹².

With the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of*

Nature, Rorty “set down the path of pragmatism, one that he has been following for the past twenty years through a body of writing unmatched in recent American intellectual history in terms of its mass, critical accessibility, and provocation”¹³. Charles Taylor observes that “what is exciting and controversial about Rorty's narrative is the sense of a radical new departure. What is radical is the promise that we can free ourselves of a whole host of questions which have been central to philosophy hitherto”¹⁴. Taylor enunciates the principal objective of Rorty's argument: philosophy is constrained by the questions it thinks it has to ask. For Rorty, the metanarrative of philosophical discourses, inherited from Plato and the tradition he helped create, has become outmoded. Rorty's intention “is to undermine the reader's confidence in 'the mind' as something about which one should have a 'philosophical' view, in 'knowledge' as something about which there ought to be a 'theory' and which has 'foundations', and in 'philosophy' as it has been conceived since Kant”¹⁵. From this, we can trace two main paths of Rorty's philosophical outline in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. First, traditional problems of epistemology (especially, the issue of foundations of truth) and metaphysics (especially, the mind-body problem) must be rejected because they are issues no longer valuable to study. Additionally, the traditional philosophical categories of metaphysics, ethics, and particularly epistemology, reflect the entrenchment of the traditional metanarrative, and should be jettisoned as well. Rorty believes that philosophy should move away from self-identification with truth-seeking and the finding of absolutes. On his evaluation, philosophers must develop mindfulness of the socio-historical context in which they are theorizing, while at the same time identifying the historicity of philosophical theories which are thought of as existing outside of time and place. It becomes apparent, then, why Rorty chose Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey as the “three most important philosophers of our century”¹⁶: each of the three became profoundly dedicated to historicist and anti-foundationalist positions in their careers, which, for Rorty, “represented a paradigm shift from the Cartesian-Kantian

era”¹⁷.

Rorty's distaste of traditional philosophical categories reached its zenith in his critique of mainstream epistemology. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn reasoned that scientific discourses function in two different ways: normally and abnormally¹⁸. The former searches for answers to questions in an environment where an accepted paradigm is present and agreed upon. That is, an agreed upon foundation is present against which suppositions are tested, verified, or refuted. The latter is revolutionary, ushering in a new paradigm with an associated sphere of new questions and problems. For Rorty, Kuhn's distinction between normal and abnormal scientific discourses translates into the philosophical distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics. Rorty contends that, similar to normal scientific discourses' notions of consensus, epistemology functions under a paradigm of “commensurability”. In his words, “*epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable...By 'commensurable' I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict*”¹⁹. For Rorty, epistemology presumes the existence of a foundation that grounds the criterion of commensuration for a variety of discourses. For an epistemologist, this foundation is truth.

For Rorty, hermeneutics is much more fugitive in its treatment of knowledge. It is “*an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt*”²⁰. He maintains that hermeneutics embodies a similar function as Kuhn's abnormal scientific discourse does. He notes:

Normal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as answering a question...Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or sets them aside²¹.

By its very nature, hermeneutics functions without a clear vision of rules that guide enquiry. It has no standard to test its

objects of inquiry against. It views philosophy and epistemology as less a unified formal discourse, or a group of discourses, than an ongoing conversation. Rorty observes that “*hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts*”²². Hermeneutics, then, is indirectly historicist, pluralistic, and antifoundationalist. It is not reduced to a notion that philosophy and epistemology are wedded in a project aimed at showing how the mind mirrors nature. Therefore, it makes no references to representation or correspondence that epistemology carries with it. Rorty concludes that “*if we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practices*”²³. The emphasis on conversation allows Rorty to move beyond the essentialism and foundationalism of traditional epistemological methods, while demonstrating the historical contingency of language and the discourses one chooses to express their knowledge and beliefs. This leads Rorty to a position of epistemological behaviorism.

Rorty describes epistemological behaviorism as “*explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former*”²⁴. This proposition is radical because it contests the traditional Kantian idea of epistemological representationalism that is the foundation of Analytic philosophy. Rorty employs Sellars's critique of the “Myth of the Given”, and Quine's appraisal of the necessary-contingent distinction to demonstrate the social nature of knowledge and belief. In Sellars and Quine, Rorty spots a “*commitment to the thesis that justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice*”²⁵. The emphasis on justification in social practice provides Rorty with a more holistic view of knowledge, and, hence, allows him to abandon any criterion of accuracy linked with epistemological representationalism.

He reasons that “*if assertions are justified by society rather than by the characterization of the inner representation they express, then there is no point in attempting to isolate privileged representations*”²⁶. Consequently, the only criterion of knowledge for Rorty's epistemological behaviorism is access to the rules of the language-game. If we see knowledge as justified in a social conversation, then “*it will not occur to us to invoke either of the traditional Kantian distinctions*”²⁷. Thus, without the appeal to representationalist epistemological techniques, Rorty concludes that the “*notion of the mind as Mirror of Nature can be discarded*”²⁸.

With the mind as Mirror of Nature metaphor discarded, Rorty maintains that philosophy should move towards purposes of edification. Using Gadamer's notion of “redescription”, Rorty describes edification as “*finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking*”, to “*reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions*”²⁹. For Rorty, by its very nature, edification is revolutionary: in Kuhn's terms, it is expressed in an abnormal discourse, for it is “*the power of strangeness*” that facilitates the shedding of “*our old selves...to aid us in becoming new beings*”³⁰. In order to fashion new words and expressions to redescribe ourselves, the discourse to articulate such a vocabulary would, essentially, need to be of a different and new brand than that of the normal discourse. The new expressions in which to redescribe the familiar are non-conformists and subversive, thus, the language used to describe the new and novel cannot be that which reflects the conformity of normal discourse. Therefore, for Rorty, there is need for openness to new ways of thinking and speaking to overcome the traditions of philosophy that are no longer expedient³¹.

If edification demands an abnormal, revolutionary discourse to redescribe our familiar mode of being, then Rorty believes a certain approach is required on the part of the philosopher. For him, the edifying “*peripheral, pragmatic philosophers are skeptical primarily about systematic philosophy, about the whole project of universal commensuration...they make fun of the classic picture of man, the picture which contains systematic philosophy, the search*

for universal commensuration in a final vocabulary"³². In challenging systematic philosophy, "great edifying philosophers {like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey} destroy for the sake of their own generation ... to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause--wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there"³³. Without the mind as Mirror of Nature, Rorty sees the hope of plurality and new ways of describing ourselves that move beyond the normal discourse provided by the traditional Western conception of philosophy and epistemology.

Rorty not only provides a hopeful vision of post-epistemology philosophy, he also held that philosophical theories and methodologies encompass a sociological dimension that is inherent in philosophical doctrines. The notion, then, of there being philosophical theories that exist in a vacuum apart from a socio-historical context is untenable for Rorty. Rather, philosophy embodies the needs and concerns of people in a definite context at a certain historical moment. For Rorty, the story of philosophy is not one of the perennial investigations of foundational problems; rather, philosophy is a story of intellectual answers to human needs and longings throughout history.

Contemporary Meta-Philosophical Arguments

Essentially, one could say that what motivated Rorty's philosophical project is a quest for significance of philosophy in a pluralistic society. For Rorty, the realization that there a call at the door of philosophy to lend a hand in social project is continuously being distorted by philosophy's image as a classroom activity. Such an image, in Rorty's judgment, seems to be reducing the role of philosophers to that of a historical interest or lone rangers closed in their own heaven. As such, Philosophy should bear a hand in shaping our present conditions. Rorty contends that the unrelenting fidelity to the Cartesian/Kantian epistemological foundation has stiffened the move for an alternative culture vision that is appropriately pragmatic. He asserts that Descartes and Kant created a rationalistic world of meaning that was far detached

from a practical appeal in daily living. Hence, there is need for deconstruction and circumvention to usher in a state of affairs in which the intellectual achievements of the contemporary man will bear hand in shaping socio-cultural realities of the epoch. Thus it is a quest for a post-philosophical culture, a reshaping of our tradition with our thoughts.

Rorty sustains that philosophers do not seem to agree as to whether philosophy is to be regarded as a science, metaphor or politics. Three answers offered are rooted in the scientific, poetic and political traditions. Each answer, according to Rorty, has been presented as the aim of philosophy in Western philosophical tradition.

According to Rorty, the scientific answer is typical of Edmund Husserl and his positivist counterparts that model philosophy on science. Their reflection seems to be remote from politics and art. While Heidegger favors the poetic answer. Pragmatists see in science and philosophy a tool for social progress³⁴; hence political. And each group is suspicious of the other.

Evidently, science is constantly growing and continually improving human condition. The problem, Rorty specifies, is not science itself but those who are using science to dictate the pace and values of the culture. This understanding opens our horizon to a whole new frame of mind. The past inaction of the philosophical tradition should no longer be stomached; the sense for urgency in searching for a new vision is expressed in the fact that we are approaching a time *“we shall no longer turn to the philosophers for rescue as our ancestors turned to the priests. We shall turn instead to the poets and the engineers, the people who produce startling new projects for achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number”*³⁵. This, certainly, will puncture philosophy's insolent image as the foundation of culture.

The expanding culture of poets, novelists, and politicians, interrogates the self-image of the philosopher as an intellectual supervisor. People are now in search of the opinion of poets and politicians rather than those of philosophers. In the face of this, philosophy senses itself as more outdated and less to do with the rest of the culture. Thus, the big showdown to philosophers in their claim to ground,

criticize, and dictate for the rest of culture: they feel irrelevant because philosophy as a whole has been deflected by those that actually strive to improve human condition.

Nonetheless, there were some redeeming philosophical voices. According to Rorty, Wittgenstein tried to form a new theory of representation which would have nothing to do with materialism; Heidegger fashioned a new set of philosophical categories which would have nothing to do with science, epistemology, or the Cartesian search for certainty; and Dewey saw the illusoriness of epistemological problems, and truth as purported correspondence, and knowledge as accuracy of representations; he then tried to fashion a naturalized version of Hegel's vision of history, by taking the line of a social crusader³⁶. Instead of arguing against the Kantian doctrines, Rorty notes, these redeeming philosophical voices set them aside in order "*to assert for the possibility of a post-Kantian culture, one in which there is no all-encompassing discipline which legitimizes or grounds the others...*"³⁷. They announced new maps of terrain, thus, paving the way for new shapes in the culture.

Departure for a Post Philosophical Culture

Rorty expresses the belief that the realization of a post-philosophical culture is imperative, because once we stop venerating idols like Marxism, rationality, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Cartesianism, etc., then we will be able to focus more fully on each other and attain a deepened sense of human solidarity. As a pragmatist culture, it will be a place for co-operation among all kinds of intellectuals. For Rorty,

This would be a culture in which neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets nor the party were thought of as more 'rational' or more 'scientific', or 'deeper' than one another. No portion of culture will be singled out as exemplifying (or signaling or failing to exemplify) the condition on which the rest aspired³⁸.

People will become champions, not because they have occult or clandestine knowledge of things, but because they have become extraordinary in being good to human beings. In other words, people will show themselves champions by being competent in their service to the human community. In

this culture in question, there will be a broader logical space in conveying communal opinions and hopes. In it, we seek for new enterprises that will help us transcend our acculturation. Against this background, Rorty trusts that *“our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to be brought up in a culture that prides itself on not being monolithic on its tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighbouring cultures”*³⁹.

Rorty believes that the hermeneutics of post-philosophical culture is to listen and partake in conversation without preconception of a predetermined foundation. The hope of agreement is never lost as long as the conversation lasts. He writes:

The notion of culture as a conversation rather than as a structure erected upon foundations fits well with this hermeneutical notion of knowledge, since getting into a conversation with strangers is like acquiring a new virtue or skill by imitating models. Is a matter of (phronesis) rather than (episteme)⁴⁰.

As conversation is an important useful tool in the social project, the post-philosophical culture should not lose sight of that sense of community, which only impassioned conversation makes possible⁴¹.

In this new culture, philosophers will become players rather than onlookers. Their thoughts will be verified by their practical and adaptive relevance to the subject within the community. The philosopher, here, risks the danger of being outdated if he does not comprehend that philosophy is an instrument for social reform.

The Credibility of Rorty's Project

Rorty persuasively opens our vistas to a passionate concern for philosophy's segregation from common human concerns. There is no doubt that Rorty searches for a condition for living in solidarity in a pluralistic society. Rorty's attack on any individual or groups who tries to dictate, under the pretense of philosophy or privileged knowledge, is illuminating. Hence, any person or group of individuals that postulates a predetermined ground blocks conversation with others, thereby causing harm to the community.

Accordingly, it is appropriate to reason that a philosopher should not detach and insulate himself from the joys and fears of his community. And if he cannot, in any way, contribute to the social project, one can rightly ask of what use is his philosophical knowledge or initiative. And if a philosopher is closed up in his own discipline and see no need for solidarity and partnership with others in the literary field, but takes the sole position of a judge of all, it will at once be an arrogance to claim to possess already all that can be known. Such a pretense and arrogance will obstruct intellectual development and solidarity in the community. Charles Guignon and David Hiley are right to hold that what motivated Rorty's post-philosophical quest is a concern expressed near the end of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that “*traditional philosophy's search for final solutions to questions about truth, rationality and knowledge could lead to 'freezing over of culture' and 'the dehumanization of human beings' seems to reflect the moral concerns that drive the argumentation of the whole book*”⁴².

Conclusion

As philosophical theories increase, philosophical propositions become gradually detached from practical and social problems that first attracted its practitioners, and progressively irrelevant to the rest of culture. Rorty advocates for a therapeutic conception of philosophy, where there is no separation of knowledge and action. This brings up an important aspect of Rorty's philosophy that illustrates his pragmatist commitments: meliorism. It is in his meliorism that one finds a profound concern for social hope that is absent of Cartesian and Kantian literature.

Improvement of human condition is, thus, at the heart of Rorty's neo-pragmatism and is realized in the abilities of human effort to create better future realities. This is a call that philosophy should not shy away from if it is to remain relevant in this contemporary epoch.

ENDNOTES

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 19. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 316.
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 23. Ibid., p. 171.
 24. Ibid., p. 174.
 25. Ibid., p. 170.
 26. Ibid., p. 174.
 27. Ibid.

- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 170.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 360.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 364.
- ³² Ibid., p. 368.
- ³³ Ibid., pp. 369-370.
- ³⁴ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 19.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 26.
- ³⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 5.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 6.
- ³⁸ Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. xl.
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- ⁴⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 319.
- ⁴¹ Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres", in Richard Rorty et al. (eds.) *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 74.
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