Pragmatism and Neo-Pragmatism, Language and "Truth"

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Pragmatism, as a philosophy, is distinctly American in nature. Originally proposed as a means for truth evaluation by Peirce in the 1870's, it was formally introduced by James as a standard philosophy at the turn of the century. Its focus on evaluative knowledge and disregard for metaphysical "Truths" set it at odds with the Continental philosophy that preceded it in the nineteenth century.[1] Dewey, who sought to restructure philosophy along the pragmatic lines that James had laid out, furthered the central concepts of Pragmatism in the decades following James. In recent years, pragmatism has again come to the forefront of philosophy, mainly through the work of Davidson in the philosophy of language, Kuhn in the philosophy of science, and Rorty in a more wide-ranging, social perspective (Rorty, 1989, 9-10).

While taking a somewhat more drastic, and some may claim expansionist, view of Pragmatism, Rorty, while working towards synthesis with Davidson and Kuhn, does follow along its main ideas. Rorty uses language as a stepping-stone to investigate reality, and as a result, to liberate academia from the notion of a structured reality and a representational view of "Truth." Rather, his conception of language is, by no means, that of the philosophers who supported the linguistic turn in philosophy that was witnessed in the twentieth century. However, his philosophy seems to present a return to the Kantian metaphysics of the nineteenth century, a move decidedly against any Pragmatic notion. For Rorty, language is not the key to reality, but simply a tool to describe our perceptions of reality. This claim, though, leads to radical extrapolation on the nature of reality, again, towards Kant.

To return to the foundations of Pragmatism, James considered the main focus of his philosophy to be the delineation between "Truth" and "truth." "Truth" was, according to James, a somewhat antiquated notion. "Truth," as an entity, involved those things that a majority of persons agreed to as the way reality was. "truths," the noncapitalized variety, were those summations that involved our everyday life. He contended, however, that "Truth happens to an idea" (77). For James, the

truth of anything does not exist solely in the world; truth, in either form, is not an existent. Rather, truths are those facts that are verified as working in the world. Those facts that could not be verified or validated would be false. "The true," James points out, "is only the expedient in our way of thinking" (86). As Rorty summarized, for James, truth = justifiability. What could be justified in nature, or through experience, was what was true, not in the scope of an ultimate reality, but true for the experience. (Rorty, 1991, 127).

Dewey took the idea of truth and ultimate reality further. He rejected the notion of ultimate reality as something on which philosophy had any intrinsic grasp. It was agreed that any notion of an ultimate reality would involve deliberation on a Kantian noumenal realm, one that could not be empirically verifiable. Thus, for Dewey, ultimate reality would, in essence, be a nonentity, something that could be neither proven nor disproven. In logical terms, it was an empty statement. Philosophy had to shift its focus from this noumenal realm to the verifiable world, to what could be proven as true relative to the situation in which it was present (Dewey, 1957, 23-7). Also, Dewey felt that philosophy had to exonerate itself from the ideas of "progress" and "ideals." Making reference to the trend in intellectual thought following the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Dewey points to the shift from a notion of progress in evolution to the concept of continual change in lifeforms. Operating under the idea of Darwinian evolution, philosophy had to cease perpetuating the myth that an end goal was what it intended. Rather, philosophy was a changing form, one that worked in a grouping based on time, tradition, and culture (Dewey, 1998, 42).

This is a key idea that Kuhn would later bring to the fore in the philosophy of science. Kuhn, while studying the history of scientific advancements, realized that dominant scientific theories did not show a progression. Rather, the history was indicative of a series of revolutions in which one grouping of ideas replaced another in an attempt to explain or better describe reality and the world. These revolutions took place due to the natural tendency for science to expound on its theories, thus eventually leading to problems that could not be solved in relation to the dominant theory of the time. A new theory or way of thinking had to be brought forth, one that would attempt to rectify the problems that the prior way of thinking left unsolved.

Later, Kuhn and Rorty would call these outdated ways of thinking, replaced through revolution, *paradigms* (Kuhn, chs. 4-8).

However, in a method removed from trends in philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century, neither James nor Dewey brings the philosophical weight of Pragmatism to bear directly on language. The dominant feature of traditional philosophy following the Pragmatists was what is traditionally called *the linguistic turn*. During this period of philosophic thought, ontological methodology centered on language. It was felt that language held the answer to questions of ontology, epistemology, and ultimately, existence and reality. This trend later branched off into conceptual analysis. With conceptual analysis, one felt content to ponder questions, and the language games in which these questions were presented, to determine the truth (Devitt and Sterelny, 280-7). This is the complete antithesis of Pragmatism; verifiability, in conceptual analysis, had been relegated to the mind and quasi-metaphysics, not to experience. James and Dewey cannot be blamed for arriving too early to critique these notions, for it would appear that both of them would have largely disagreed with the majority of the concepts present in the linguistic turn, and particularly those found in the works of the conceptual analysts.

In particular, the Pragmatists would take issue with cognitive verification as the only means towards truth. For the adherents of Pragmatism, it is crucial to have experiential verification for "truths," not simply proof through idea problem-solving that the conceptual analysts espoused. Thus, Rorty, writing after the linguistic turn, realized that any notions of reality and truth that he wished to posit would have to take into account language in some way. However, as a contemporary Pragmatist, it is not a stretch to assume that he would hold a deflationary view of language, one that, like the Pragmatists before him, places more of an emphasis on experience than metaphysics.

Rorty does just that by appealing to Davidson as one of the main contributors to his theory of reality and language. Davidson has a somewhat deflationary view of language and its relation to the reality of language speakers. He posits the "passing theory" as a means to interpret the noises and gestures that each person makes. Davidson explodes the idea that language has an intrinsic semantic quality to it. Instead, in accor-

dance with his passing theory, an individual draws the meaning of sentences and words from experience and from verbal and nonverbal context clues. Communication between individuals is too prone to misinterpretation and error to be semantically holistic. Rather, communication follows one's experiences and one's notions about these experiences and the relation they have to the world around them (Rorty, 1989, 11-16).

Rorty recognizes the importance of Davidson's passing theory and the implications that it holds for philosophy. Without a truly semantic quality, language is stripped of its metaphysical ability of reality solving. Rorty, in the same vein as Dewey, rejects any idea of an ultimate reality. The world around us has no intrinsic nature or essence; it is an existent that the human perceives along side itself.

This raises an interesting point in relation to language. Rorty claims that the work of Davidson is much like that of a "field linguist" interacting with a foreign, non-English speaking tribe. Here is where we see the passing theory in action: to discern what the natives are discussing, one must deal with experiential knowledge and causation. Reference is squeezed out of the language equation. As Rorty contends, "...Davidson is suggesting we maximize coherence and truth first, and then let reference fall out as it may" (1991, 134).

Rorty, alongside Davidson, has done away with any linguistic theory of reference, and in essence, the philosophy of language. By letting reference "fall out as it may," it would appear that language has become an almost relativistic form of communication. Reference has taken a strict Pragmatic bent; a thing's reference is determined by the expediency in understanding that individuals gain by the reference-grounding that they create. Without a definite theory of reference fixing, language becomes an amorphous entity lacking any central standard against which it can be measured. This would appear to be a controversial concept.

Davidson's rejection of semantics, when combined with Rorty's ideas of reality, lends itself to some interesting perspectives on the nature of reality. As illustrated above in the discussion of the linguistic turn, many twentieth-century philosophers felt, and still contend, that language is a jigsaw puzzle, the final goal being the ability to decipher ultimate reality. Rorty, borrowing from Wittgenstein, sees language not as pieces to a jigsaw

puzzle, but as a tool for the description of reality (1989, 12-13). However, he takes a realist stance in relation to the world around him. Reality holds no mysteries for us, no clues to lead us to an ultimate goal. For there is no ultimate goal; much like Dewey's reflections on philosophy and Darwinian theory, Rorty sees language as moving and evolving, but not towards any prescribed juncture with an overarching Truth:

> Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independent of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot. (5)

The world, as an entity, exists outside the framework of the human. The individual is present in the world, exists in it as well, but is not secretly in touch with it. Language, as Davidson has illustrated, is not a medium between the individual and reality. The gap between the individual and the world is not surmountable by language – or in another case, the concept "mind" – and should not be viewed as a way to reach any conclusions about reality and the world (10).

What use, then, does language – as a tool – fulfill? Language describes the reality that an individual finds herself in. However, the world does not select certain words to serve as a means to describe itself. Language is a human creation. Thus, language is devoid of any knowledge of the world. And without an intrinsic nature, the world does not change, especially in regard to human values. What does change, as history has shown, is language, as well as the ideas that language forms. As Rorty points out, "…human beings make truths by making language in which to phrase sentences" (9).

Rorty presents us with an interesting dilemma: if the human is separated from the world, the world holds no final goal, and language serves as a descriptive agent for the world and provides the human with "truths," how do we explain the supposed progression of human history towards the eventual complete description/understanding of the world in which it exists? Rorty claims that this is not progress, but a process, one that continues unabated throughout human history. Societies, intellectuals, and individuals have always sought to understand

the world and reality around them. These have all operated in the groupings that Dewey commented on at the turn of the century and which Kuhn elucidated for the sciences, calling them paradigms. None of these have any access to the real nature of reality, but they are attempts none the less.

Rorty's conception of history is that of changing vocabularies. A dominant vocabulary is in place as a means to describe reality. This reality is not "Truth," for it is still not the medium for inter-human reality communion. However, it is the "truth" for those operating in the present paradigm; it is true for the knowledge that they have present before them. This is by no means static, though. As new vocabularies arise – for instance, with new scientific findings or the advent of new scientific theories – the new vocabulary gradually infringes on the former one. There is a time of muddled definitions as the two vocabularies contest with each other, until gradually the new vocabulary reaches general acceptance, thus replacing the old vocabulary:

> (The method)...is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for apparent new forms of nonlinguistic behavior. (Rorty, 1989, 9)

These paradigm shifts, as termed by Kuhn, are a constant process of redescription of reality. Each new paradigm seeks a more efficient way to describe the world around it, one that attempts to solve the problems and inefficiencies of the previous paradigm (Kuhn, ch. 13). The shifting paradigms, though, get no closer to any overarching "Truth." Rather, each paradigm operates within the conceptions of language and knowledge that it has present before it. No paradigm is truer than any other – each has its own truth-value inside itself, not across paradigmatic lines (Rorty, 1989, 6-7).

Rorty, following along traditional Pragmatic lines, delineates between "Truth" and "truth." Truth, in both forms, are human creations, they do not exist freely in the world. Neither do they have any sort of form in the world; they exist purely as human creations and only as human creations. Thus, one can discard "Truth" – or metaphysical constants – because they draw conclusions from nature that are not there. To have "Truths," reality must have an intrinsic essence to it, an essence rejected by

Rorty. One is thus left with "truths" relative to the paradigm in which they find themselves living. These truths are the Pragmatic, verifiable truths that we see in relation to our experience.

And yet Rorty widens the scope of these truths: one sees in relation to her experience these truths are direct descriptions of the reality around the individual. They are not "Truths" for two reasons: first, there is no way for the individual to gain an ultimate grasp on reality, and second, without being able to grasp fully the nature of reality, they are simply operative in the paradigm in which they are present. They are bound to change, evolving in a constant state of change and upheaval (Rorty, 1989, 9; 1991, 127).

It is important here to note that although Rorty discusses paradigm shifts along the same lines as Kuhn, he does not subscribe to his notion of incommensurability, particularly in regard to the sciences. Kuhn contended that, in the time between paradigms, which he referred to as crisis, it was possible for two scientists to view the same experiment with the same results and "see" two different things. Each would be operating in his or her own paradigm, thus claiming that experimental results led to different, and sometimes contrary conclusions. For each scientist, each result would symbolize a different element; words, language itself, would thus be intrinsically and semantically different based on the experiences of each scientist. Communication between the two paradigms would be impossible because the same words, the same results, were indicative of differing worldviews. This was the barrier of incommensurability (Kuhn, 146-51).

Rorty points out that incommensurability does not equate to unlearnability, which thus leads to discussability. While the Aristotelian concept of the universe cannot be directly translated into the Galilean, an adherent of one could be made to learn the other and to take it as a *possible* description of the working of the world. Here, Rorty takes something of a departure from the Pragmatism of James. James argued that one could claim that past theoretical concepts (Ptolemaic astronomy, Euclidean space, etc.) were "absolutely false." New developments have shown that these thinkers could have gone beyond the limits that they thought existed. Present thinkers have proven that new perspectives on the world operate contrary to the past ones; for James this proves them false (86). Rorty views these inter-paradigm

valuations as invalid. "Ethnocentrism" – the idea that our concept of true was created in our paradigm and cannot be applied to past paradigms – keeps the individual from being able to claim that one paradigm had a superior description of reality. Rorty would again claim that no concept of reality could ever be superior to another; all are hopelessly separated from the world and are not capable of bridging the human/world gap (1991, 46-51).

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Rorty raises an interesting, and even controversial, notion. We can start with a solidly Pragmatic idea - the world does *not* make facts true. Each description operates as a means to bridge the gap between the world and the human. However, this presents us with another surprising problem, one that might not typically be considered in the era of contemporary philosophy. The unbridgeable gap that Rorty claims exists between the human and the world is a similar one to that described by Kant, which he termed the division between the phenomenal (physical) realm and the noumenal (metaphysical) realm. The noumenal world was beyond our perceptions; it existed on the other side of the "wall of knowledge." The noumenal realm could only be described through our rationalistic thoughts concerning it. The noumenal realm contained notions that humans assumed *a priori* and then imposed on their reality to construct it from a blur.[2] While not necessarily as strong a claim when placed alongside the realism of Rorty, Kant does recognize the significance of the metaphysical split in our reality.

Rorty discusses the same division. Yet he does not posit a means to describe his noumenal world. Instead, he claims that we are forever separated from it and it is impossible for us to ever actually fully conceptualize and understand it. His phenomenal realm is created completely from human design; it is the concept of the universe, or paradigm, in which we, as individuals, work. The noumenal realm is the actual world, the world into which we have no insight. To use an almost Existential term, it would appear that the individual is *alienated* from the true nature of reality.

This does not appear to be of concern to Rorty. In his thinking, we should abandon any conception of a connection with the world. Humans have for centuries lived this way, sheltered in the worldview of their respective paradigms. Society has

still functioned; humans have still found a sense of individual purpose or "meaning" in their actions in the midst of this disconnectedness from the world. This conceptualization of reality brings the nature of science into question, however. If we can never bridge the gap between the human and the world, what good is continued scientific inquiry, especially if its main focus is the eventual description of the world around us?

Rorty doesn't completely say. To him, scientific "advancement" is part of a great "cultural conversation" that he sees as the development of human intellectual history. Rather than focus on the metaphysical, we should focus instead on the development of human culture and the societal implications that this portends. This is not a new concept; Dewey pushed for the same shift in focus in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. As stated previously, he thought philosophy futile if its only endeavor was to sit and discuss things, such as ultimate reality, that could never be fully quantified to begin with. This left philosophy in the peculiar position of leaving the general populace assuming that they had the key to the universe, when they had but a theoretical concept of little true cash value (Dewey, 1957, 23-5).

Dewey does not appear to go as far as Rorty does, though. While he rejected the notion of ultimate reality, he never felt that humans were separated from the exact content of the world around them. It is safe to assume that neither James nor Dewey, nor any of the other turn of the century Pragmatists would espouse the concepts that Rorty presents to us at the end of the same century. Rorty himself admits that what he calls "pragmatism" is more along the lines of "left-wing Kuhnianism" (1991, 38). This radical conception of reality, and the human separation from it, seems to bring the scope of philosophy back to the high-minded German metaphysicians, like Kant, with whom the Pragmatists sought to do away. Rorty has deflated the linguistic turn in philosophy, while at the same time expanding the focus and range of Pragmatism from its pure form, i.e. of James and Dewey. Rorty, it would appear, seems content to expand on his foundation and rightly deserves the term neo-Pragmatist until a possible, more applicable one can be found.

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NOTES
[1] See "Pragmatism" in Audi.
[2] *Ibid.* "Kant."

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